

ABIDE

DISCOVERING YOUR OLD TESTAMENT



GLORY REVEALED

EZEKIEL

To delve into this book is to enter into a mysterious intrigue to both Bible scholars and laypeople alike. There is so much interest in this book because it contains lessons, stories, pronouncements, pictures, and predictions that cover a wide range of topics. Further, some of the information contained in this book is very cryptic in nature to even the most clever of minds and there is debate to this day as to what some of the subjects are ultimately describing.

Before we begin to speak about the content rich environment that is this prophecy, let's talk a little bit about the man, his name and his background. The name Ezekiel means "God Strengthens" and when we look at the kind of ministry God had called this man to, we find that Ezekiel needed all the strength he could get.

When Ezekiel was about 25 years old, it appears that he was serving in a priestly capacity before being carried away into Babylonian captivity. In the beginning chapters of this book we are given several pieces of background information that help us figure out some key portions of history.

Once the nation of Judah was captured, the Babylonians started to carry away important members of society in waves. According to 2 Kings 24, Nebuchadnezzar started with the kings and leaders, then the treasurers, then the men of war, after that the intellectuals and craftsmen. Nebuchadnezzar, in other words, took those whom he deemed important for their society to work well, and then left everyone else to fend for themselves. This occurred in three stages and in this stage, the city of Jerusalem was left completely destroyed.

As we follow the timeline here, it appears that Daniel was taken during the first wave of those imprisoned and carried away, and Ezekiel was taken during the second wave. When we talk about being carried away, we mean far away. We see from Ezekiel 3 that he was taken about 600 miles away from Jerusalem. We don't consider this as extremely far in our day, but in a caravan of prison lines on foot, this journey was one of the worst kinds imaginable.

Ezekiel was called when he was about 30 years old and it was at a time when Jerusalem had been defeated, but was not decimated. Because of this, there were those Jews who were still living in a fantasy world where Jerusalem could not be touched and everything would be ultimately restored in just a little bit of time. But God called Ezekiel in the midst of this 'positive thinking' and commissioned him to prophesy against this type of thinking as well as several other things.

It all started with a vision. That's what you see in chapter 1. It is that famous vision of the "Wheel in the middle of the wheel." This is where the mystery of this book begins, right up front.

So with this information, let's see if we can unravel a thought or two and hopefully make a little more sense of the book of Ezekiel.

How to Think About Ezekiel

This book was written approximately between 533 to 570 B.C. and his ministry lasted about twenty-two years. As was briefly mentioned before, Ezekiel was born in Judah, but he died in Babylon. Another interesting fact to consider is that Ezekiel or any portion of the Scripture contained in this book are not specifically mentioned anywhere else in Scripture.

As for the message of Ezekiel, his first task was to preach to the nation and once again combat the false prophets who were trying to tell God's people that Jerusalem would never fall, and to not worry because they would soon be returned to the land of Judah. Then Ezekiel was instructed to turn to other nations and prophesy against them. And finally, Ezekiel was given some grand visions about the future.

Let's see how this works:

Judah Will Eventually Fall (Chapters 4-24): After Ezekiel's prophetic commission in chapters 1-3, Ezekiel starts on a case-building mission as to why God would ultimately bring down Judah on a grand scale, instead of what was experienced up until this point.

In this section, Ezekiel gives a series of prophecies that deal with the human race and Israel specifically. What is really sad is that with each passing chapter you get flashing glimpses of God's glory moving further and further away from His people. First, God's glory was in the temple, then in chapter 10, God's glory moves from the Holy of Holies into the outer court. After this, in chapter 11, you find that God's glory moves from the outer court to the Mount of Olives and up toward the sky.

There is no favor, there is no comfort here— only judgment. What a sad picture.

Judah's Enemies Will Follow (Chapters 25-32): After the pronouncement against God's people, Ezekiel turns to their enemies. These people were not only evil themselves, but were taking pleasure in the punishment of God's people. They were actually rejoicing over it.

Ammon (25:1-7)

Moab (25:8-11)

Edom (25:12-14)

Philistia (25:15-17)

Tyre (26:1-28:19)

Sidon (28:20-24)

Egypt (29:20-24)

Judah Still Has A Future (Chapters 33-48): The story changes right here. Where once there was only a boneyard of death left in the wake of God's judgment, God once again pieces together his people and gives them a new breath of life and vitality. In this section you see a special temple construction project written in extreme detail and a redistribution of a special land God would give.

What to look for in Ezekiel

There are several areas in this book that need special attention if you want to understand this message a little better.

Key Words and Phrases—

The Word of the LORD Came: This phrase occurs almost fifty times throughout the course of your reading of this book. It is a continual reminder of the authority in what was spoken and why the words spoken should be listened to and obeyed.

They Shall Know that I am the LORD: This is another important phrase that bears mentioning. This phrase is repeated nearly seventy times throughout the book. God does not want there to be any confusion about who exactly is conducting and ordering the courses of human history.

Son of Man: This you see used over one hundred times as God is speaking directly to Ezekiel. What is significant about this phrase is the fact that we see a certain and clear distinction between the Creator and the created, and that Ezekiel is acting as a representative of mankind at this point. It has been said that Ezekiel's life was a living parable of sorts. He was a living sign to the house of Israel. If you remember, Jesus also accepted this title because He too became a representative of mankind. He was the "last Adam" according to Romans 5.

Glory: This word, "Kabod" in Hebrew, has to do with being ascribed weight or worthiness. When God reveals Himself, His glory is the outward manifestation or outward description of what is known about Him. He reveals Himself in Glory; in the weight of all authority. This is the key to the book. In Ezekiel, God reveals His glory.

Idols: It was for this reason that God's people were in trouble. This word means a "shapeless thing" and has to do with the way these objects were made. They were made out of rock or tree logs... shapeless things. Ezekiel uses this word nearly forty times to describe what God's people were actually worshiping rather than ascribing glory to the One true God.

Sermons—

Ezekiel was another one of those creative preachers. We spoke about Jeremiah being an interesting communicator, well Ezekiel was down right shocking. He used every form of device to bring God's Word. He used proverbs, parables, illustrations, and even preached full sermons without words. Let's look at just a few.

Mime Preaching: In chapter 3, God told Ezekiel that He was going to strike him dumb so he would not be able to reprove the people. This left Ezekiel having to act out in order to communicate until the appointed time when God would open his mouth once more.

Figurine Preaching: In Chapter 4, Ezekiel was told to take a piece of tile and make a little model city of Jerusalem, and then build a fort against it, and then lay siege on it. He was supposed to act out with small action figures what would ultimately happen to Jerusalem in front of all the people (4:1-3).

Lazy Preaching: This title is given in a little bit of jest as we come to a style of preaching in chapter 4 that was also quite strange. In this chapter God has Ezekiel lay on his left side only, bound with bands so that he could not turn for 350 days, and then do the same for the right side for 40 days. This would have been a terrible sermon to preach. If you can imagine the people observing this live illustration, what questions might have arisen!

Some believe that many of these preaching techniques were to also capture the mind and imagination of the children who would have seen these kinds of things. Perhaps where an adult may have been hardened and callused, a child would have watched in wonder, asked their parents, and then, as they lived out their days in Babylon, they would remember that old crazy prophet Ezekiel and realize that he wasn't so crazy after all!

Visions—

Some of the greatest visions are recorded for us right here in the book of Ezekiel. Sometimes, when we are presented with individuals in the Bible who had a vision from God, the information is very much guarded and general. But there are other occasions (such as in Ezekiel and the Book of the Revelation) when we are given vivid detail. Sometimes we wish we knew more, and sometimes we wish we simply understood. Such is the case here in Ezekiel. Yes the image is grand, but it is perplexing.

Ezekiel's Call: This is probably one of the most well known visions, but also one of the most confusing. In Chapter 1:4 God calls Ezekiel with a dramatic vision. It started with a “whirlwind” from the North. This is usually believed to be the sign of God’s coming judgment. It is followed by a great cloud of fire rolling forward and that is symbolic of the destruction that would soon take place. Okay, this is easy enough as you’re reading along, but all of the sudden you are introduced to four living creatures that came out of the fire called Seraphim. Each one had four faces: The face of the man, the face of a lion, the face of an ox, and the face of an eagle. This along with other descriptors as well as information given regarding the “wheel in the wheel” leave you good and confused right at the beginning.

Therefore, just to answer a few of these questions in the simplest form possible, it is commonly held that the face of the man represented intelligence, the face of the lion represented strength, the face of the ox represented service, and the eagle represented the realm of heaven.

As for the ‘wheel in the wheel’ instead of focusing on design, we need to focus instead on what it is able to accomplish. The way it could move and turn in any direction. Its function suggests that there was nothing that could escape it. So when we place this in the context of the book and in the context of symbolism (where it belongs), we understand that this has to do with the absolute sovereignty of God. We have seen this before, but here we have it in a vivid and dramatic picture lighted in the most breathtaking way imaginable. This is evidenced by the fact that when Ezekiel saw all of this, he immediately hit the ground on his face.

Other visions include the “Dry bones” passage in chapter 37, the telling of Gog and Magog (which you find once again in the book of Revelation) in chapter 38, and a detailed description building of the millennial temple. This whole book is filled with compelling visions.

What to Gain from Ezekiel

God’s Glory Is Never to be Traded: We mentioned briefly that this was the theme of the book. You cannot move through this book accurately without being confronted with a heightened sense of God’s glory revealed here. In chapters 8-10 you see the manifestation of God’s glory leaving His people. It has to do with God’s known and perceivable presence and the fact that God will remove this from the life of a rebellious people.

It is important to note here that while God’s glory was departing, He brought His people to the place that they thought that they wanted more. He removed Himself from them while at the same time moving them to what they had set their heart to have— idols. It was God saying, “Alright, you want idols? Let me lead you to the place where they are the epicenter of humanity and see how you like it. I’ll leave, and you can have what you want in the place where idol worship is greatest.”

What a punishment! We have seen this before in Scripture, how God’s people are determined to do a certain thing against God and God gives them exactly what they want. But to do this means that His perceivable presence is moved further and further away.

God Glory Can Never be Extinguished: By the time you reach chapter 37, the tone of the book changes. Ezekiel is brought before a valley that acted as a graveyard and which was full of dried old bones. With one command after another, these bones became full human skeletons, then full fleshly bodies who were still dead, then, God told Ezekiel to command the wind to bring them breath, and once this was done, there was a living, breathing army of individuals.

What we learn here is God’s inexhaustible commitment to His people and that He will bring revival and breathe new life in His people. This has to do with Israel directly, but it cannot be overlooked that God will do the same for us for His glory’s sake. This outward manifestation of God’s work can never be stopped.



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