



Week One - Prophets and Visions

Day One: Read Ezekiel 1:1-3

Understanding the Passage

If we want to understand crazy prophets like Ezekiel, it helps to know a little history. Knowing the history helps us to figure out what God was using the prophets to say to the people of their time. When we catch a glimpse of that message, then we can begin to figure out how the words of the prophets still speak to our time.

One way to understand the history of Israel is to look at who the “bad guys” were.

- The first enemy nation we find in the Old Testament is **Egypt**, at the time of Moses (let’s say 1450-1300 BC).
- Then, when Joshua led the people to conquer the land of Canaan, it was the ‘ites and the ‘stines (say “steens”). These were the **Canaanites** and Edomites and Amorites etc., as well as the Philistines. One could say during these centuries, the enemies were “the locals” and the Israelites, even Israelite kings, who took on worship of the local gods (say 1300-800 BC).
- Then the enemy was the **Assyrians**, who came from the northern part of what is now Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. They conquered the northern part of Israel and almost took control of Jerusalem. (722 BC) The capital of the Assyrian empire was Nineveh, on the opposite bank of the Tigris River from the modern city of Mosul, Iraq.
- In 605 BC, the **Babylonians** defeated the Assyrians. The Babylonians were from the southern part of Iraq. They destroyed Jerusalem, and the many of the people of Israel were deported throughout the Babylonian empire. The leaders were taken to Babylon itself, the capital city on the Euphrates River south of where Baghdad is today. This period is called “The Exile.”
- The Israelites stayed in Babylon until the **Persians** (modern Iran) defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC, and the Israelites were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the temple.
- The Persians were defeated by the Greeks/Seleucids (330 BC) and then they were conquered by the Romans (63 BC).

Ezekiel was a prophet of the Exile, along with Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Obadiah, and Second Isaiah (40-66). The Chebar River (verse 1) is near Nippur, in Iraq, about 50 miles away from Babylon, and is mentioned eight times in the book of Ezekiel. This passage tells us that Ezekiel was one of the children of Israel who

had been deported to this foreign land. We begin our study by recognizing that Ezekiel's prophecy can teach us about ways God might speak to us in the difficult, dry, exile times of our lives.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why do you think the passage moves from first person to third person and then back to first person?
3. What do you think it means when it says, "The hand of the Lord was upon him" in verse 3?
4. Have you ever experienced times you have felt like you were "in exile," away from the systems, structures, and familiarity that had supported you?
5. How did God work in your life during that difficult time? Were all the ways God worked provisions of comfort, or were some of the messages hard and difficult?

Day Two - Read Ezekiel 1:4-28

Understanding the Passage

The prophecy of Ezekiel is full of visions, as are many of the books of the prophets. The visions enable the prophet to make the message he passes on to the people more personal and powerful. It is the difference between a simple assertion, like "Christ died for my sins," and reading the narrative in the Gospel of John, or watching the movie "The Passion of the Christ." The visions are full of details. Sometimes, the details symbolize something, and the prophet shares that with us. Sometimes, it seems that the details simply provide color and power to the message.

The vision of the throne in Ezekiel 1 includes details which help the reader to be drawn into the vision along with Ezekiel himself. It begins with a windstorm and the cloud and fire in the cloud – just a general picture. But then there are specific descriptions which make the reader long for a specific explanation – four living creatures like humans, but each with four faces and four wings, with straight legs and calves' feet, and hands under their wings. The four faces were that of a man, a lion, an eagle, and an ox. And there were wheels with eyes on them. These details all seem at first to be so important, but as the reader continues, you realize they are only the buildup. Above the creatures was an "expanse like ice," and on that expanse was a throne of sapphire, and above the throne was a figure like that of a man... Now we are getting to the point, the climax – this is "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God." (verse 28). It seems to be a chariot throne of sorts, with awe-inspiring and perhaps terrifying creatures who function as part of the chariot, and serve as bearers of the throne. The details before are only reminders of the mystery of things beyond our understanding, all of it revolving around the very presence of God himself.

And two things happened with this vision. Ezekiel fell face down in worship. And Ezekiel heard the voice of God.

We are often suspicious of intense personal religious experiences. If you have been one to experience such things, you know that passing those visions on to others usually brings a cynical look or a patronizing smile and nod. But these sorts of personal encounters are powerful for those who experience them firsthand. And our experiences of the holy presence of God, encountered in various ways, prompt us to do the same things Ezekiel did. We bow our spirits in humble adoration and awe for

God, and then we do our best to try to figure out just what the vision might mean for us, that we might hear God's voice during it.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage spoke to you the most and why?
2. When you read through this first vision of Ezekiel, did you get a sense of the majesty and power of God?
3. All intense religious experiences do NOT come as visions or voices. Sometimes, it is just a sense of God's presence. Have you ever had such an experience? Can you describe it? How did it affect you?
4. What makes you bow your spirit in humble adoration and awe?

Day Three – Read Ezekiel 2:1-3:3

Understanding the Passage

As part of the vision, Ezekiel is filled with the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that is at work in him. The Spirit calls him "mortal," or literally, "son of man," which was a common phrase in Israel to simply mean "human being." Interestingly, it was Jesus' favorite self-designation; he called himself Son of Man more than he called himself Son of God. Son of God emphasized his divinity, and son of man emphasized his humanity. In Ezekiel's vision, God tells him, the mere mortal, that he will give him the words to say. As a way of demonstrating that the words will come from God, Ezekiel is given a scroll to eat, which he eats. This is Ezekiel's call and commissioning as a prophet, and it has a number of elements:

1. He is being sent to a particular people with a particular message.
2. He should not be afraid of them.
3. He should not worry about whether they will listen, but only be willing to speak truthfully.
4. He must say what he is given to say.
5. He must first consume the words, before he can share them.
6. The words will taste sweet and be fulfilling for him.

When we have powerful encounters with the divine, we almost always walk away from that holiness with a sense of something to do or something to say to others. At the very least, we walk away with a sense that we ought to be about doing something in response. Too often we fret about how we are to respond, whether we will find the right words or accomplish the right actions. Instead, God reminds us that God will give us the words, the deeds, the purpose, the direction we need to follow when the time is right. Instead, if we turn our own energies to receiving and internalizing God's word, we will find it sweet and fulfilling. And as it is internalized, we will discover we have the words to say and the message to share.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verses(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. In your Bible, underline every time it says "you, son of man" or "you, mortal."
3. The contrast made is between the Israelites and Ezekiel. Why do you think this contrast is made?

4. Have you ever had a sense of God calling you to something specific? How did you hear that call?
5. Do you find reading and internalizing scripture to be sweet and fulfilling? Why or why not? What would make it more so?

Day Four - Read Ezekiel 3:4-15

Understanding the Passage

Ezekiel is living in a foreign land, with foreign people, who speak a foreign language. The Israelites are a people confined to ghettos in Babylon, having been taken from their homes and possessions and way of life. One would think that God would be after the Babylonians, the obvious bad guys. And one would think that the Israelites would be the people most willing to listen to God's direction through Ezekiel, especially in their desperate situation. Instead, God's message to Ezekiel says three things:

- 1) Israel is hard headed and stubborn, believing that they are right, unwilling to listen to the words of the prophets.
- 2) God will make Ezekiel hard headed too, so that he can withstand the persecution coming his way.
- 3) Ezekiel is to receive God's words himself first, and appropriate them into his life. Then he can share them with others.

We usually think of prophets as people who foretell the future. While this is sometimes a part of their message, the prophets are those who speak to the people on behalf of God. Their most important job is to speak the truth. It is most often a thankless job, as the message is often not received well. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

The Bible speaks of two basic groups of prophets. There were royal prophets, who were employed as part of the royal court to provide guidance and direction to the King. The prophet Samuel, for example, actually chose David to be the king to follow Saul. The prophet Nathan confronted David about his murder of Bathsheba's husband and taking her as his wife. But by the time of Ezekiel, the prophets often stood clearly against the kings of their day, and were often imprisoned by the kings. They generally provided scathing commentaries against both the kings themselves and the people of Israel. Their criticism usually aimed at two key areas: 1) worshipping idols and foreign gods, and 2) issues of social justice, where the poor and powerless were oppressed by the powerful. The prophets would speak those words of criticism, and then would foretell the consequences of those actions for the Israelites.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Which verses(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Do you think you are "hard headed, stubborn, and rebellious?" How do you know if you are hard headed or if you are just standing up for what you think is right?
3. Who are modern prophets who "speak truth to power?" In what ways do you think modern prophets are persecuted?

Day Five – Read Ezekiel 3:16-27

Understanding the Passage

This is a difficult passage to read, in that it speaks of the dire consequences of a people who turn away from being led by God, and let their pride and hard-headedness rule. There are two kinds of consequences mentioned:

- 1) God tells Ezekiel about the consequences to Israel if they refuse to listen. This is a statement about personal responsibility. God describes three scenarios to Ezekiel. In the first, Ezekiel hears the word of the Lord and does not share it. In the second, Ezekiel hears the word of the Lord and warns Israel of their iniquity, but they do not listen. The consequences for Israel in either case is death. In the third, Israel hears the word and they change, choosing not to sin, and their choice brings life. Author Robert Fulghum says that one sentence that is always true is this: “Whatever, there are consequences.” The prophet who speaks truth paints a picture of the choice Israel is to make between death and life.
- 2) God points to the consequences to Ezekiel if he refuses to speak. This is God’s statement about pastoral or prophetic responsibility — Ezekiel is called to be a “sentinel” or a “watchman.” He is like the guard at the gate, whose job is cry out when danger is approaching. If he fails to cry out, he must pay the consequence. But if he cries out and the people fail to listen, they will bear their own burden. I am reminded of a man I saw interviewed on television once, who was asked if he had considered trying to bang on the door and save his next-door neighbors when their home was on fire. He stammered his response, “well, um, I didn’t want to wake the baby.” (The family woke up anyway and all were fine.) Too often, we fail to speak the truth to our neighbors or to power because we are afraid we will offend them, or we are afraid they won’t listen anyway.

This passage concludes with a strange occurrence, God striking Ezekiel with both immobility and the inability to speak. This happens twice more, later in the prophecies of Ezekiel. The point of these brief words is to remind Ezekiel and the reader that God will control not only the words he is to say, but to whom and when he is to say them. For the prophet to be authentic, it must be the word of the Lord that he speaks, rather than a message that is his own.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Which verses(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Does this passage make you think that God is not a God of love? Does love remove from us the consequences of our actions?
3. Have you ever had someone warn you of the consequences of your actions? How did you respond?
4. Have you ever had to warn someone else of the consequences of his or her actions?
5. How can someone know if the words they feel called to speak are from God or are their own?

Questions for Weekly Discussion (based on video lesson, daily readings and reflections, and weekly sermon):

1. Of the daily Bible readings and reflections from this week, which one hit home for you, or provoked the most thoughts and questions?
2. Read chapter 1, verse 28. Have you ever had an experience of awe so powerful it made you fall on your face in worship? What gives you a sense of awe and wonder? What do you think it means that God told Ezekiel to “stand up on his feet and he would talk to him?” (2:1)
3. Have you ever experienced times you have felt like you were “in exile,” away from the systems, structures, and familiarity that had supported you? How did you cope with that sense of isolation?
4. Who are the prophets in your life who tell you things you don’t want to hear?
5. Do you find that you are hard-headed, stubborn, and rebellious, as the people of Israel are described?
6. Are there times you have a message to share that tastes sweet to you, but not so sweet for others?
7. What are the means God has used for you (or others) to share those difficult messages?
8. How can hard messages be shared so we are more likely to listen? Does it seem that Ezekiel even cared whether they listened and responded or not? What do you think you answer says about truth?