



## Week Two – Yahweh Has Left the Building

**Week 2, Day 1: Read Ezekiel 4:1-17**

### Understanding the Passage

Homesick and heartbroken, Ezekiel writes from exile in Babylonia to explain the nightmare he and his people have endured so far. In 605 BC, Ezekiel was forced, along with 8,000-10,000 others, to leave his home and loved ones behind. The Babylonian military machine often carried out these selective deportations to remove political, spiritual, and economic leadership from enemy kingdoms they had defeated. It was a strategic move to break down national resistance, prevent any possibility of revolt, and replenish Babylon's economic and military coffers from any losses incurred during the siege.

Ezekiel also writes with a word of warning: *the worst is yet to come*. His writing style is often crass and incendiary, earning Ezekiel nicknames like "Prophet of Doom" and "The Funeral Director" (19:1, 28:11, 32:1). This week's readings represent some of Ezekiel's gloomiest, most graphic prophecies.

Here are a few helpful things to know as you work through today's reading:

- 4:1 - *Take a block of clay...draw the city of Jerusalem on it*. City maps drawn on sun-dried bricks were very common throughout Mesopotamia – archaeologists have found dozens of them from Ezekiel's time period. However, none of them depict a siege like the one God instructed Ezekiel to portray.
- 4:3 - *an iron wall*. Iron was counted as a precious metal because of its strength and durability. The iron wall in Ezekiel's map may represent a barrier between God and the people of Jerusalem.
- 4:9 - *wheat and barley...beans and lentils...millet and spelt*. In an ancient Jewish story, a rabbi conducted an experiment in which these ingredients were combined to make bread. The result was so disgusting that not even a dog would eat it. Under siege, however, the famished people of Jerusalem will eat food that even dogs refuse.
- 4:10 - *twenty shekels of food each day (about eight ounces)*. Before the Babylonian armies invaded a city, they would surround it for months, cutting off all incoming food supplies from outlying farms. Sometimes people in the cities would surrender before the invasion even occurred, due to malnutrition and dehydration.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What do you think were Ezekiel's reasons for sharing this vision?
3. Have you ever lived through a season of great scarcity? If not, then just think of a time when people were forced to subsist and survive on what they had. How does scarcity change people? How does God respond in our times of scarcity?
4. What do you think the Lenten practice of fasting has to do with biblical themes of scarcity, self-denial, siege, and dependence on God?

### **Week 2, Day 2: Read Ezekiel 5:1-13**

#### **Understanding the Passage**

God called Ezekiel to prophesy to the Israelites during a particularly dark time in their history: the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the subsequent exile of Israel's leaders to Babylon. Ezekiel's message is clear: by their violence, oppression, and lack of concern for the poor, the people of Israel denied God and have brought this condemnation down on themselves. Through Ezekiel, God makes no bones about it: the consequences of the people's sin have come home to roost.

Here are a few helpful things to know as you work through today's reading:

- Shaving yourself with a blade could mean several things in Ezekiel's context: mourning the loss of a loved one, publicly confessing your sins, sudden poverty or loss due to a tragedy, or a change in your social status (such as from "free" to "slave").
- In ancient Mesopotamia, hair (along with blood) appears to have been one of the primary representatives of a person's essence or life force.
- 5:7: *Unruly*. Could also mean insolence, rebellion, hubris.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why do you think shaving or cutting was such a powerful symbol of grief, shame, or loss of connection to God?
3. Have you ever felt *cut off* from God? What circumstances led to you feeling that way, and how did you respond? How did God respond?

### **Week 2, Day 3: Read Ezekiel 7:5-14**

#### **Understanding the Passage**

Are we having fun yet?!

What is the deal with Ezekiel? Isn't he coming on a little too strong here? And if Ezekiel really is telling God's truth, then what does that say about God? Many people find it extremely difficult to reconcile Ezekiel's God with the God of the New Testament as revealed in Jesus Christ.

This problem isn't new; it goes all the way back to the Second Century AD. Around 130 AD, a wealthy Roman Christian named Marcion had serious problems with the violence and cruelty he found in the Old Testament. He decided Yahweh was not the true God who sent Jesus to save the world, but a lesser God whom Christ dethroned. Marcion created his own Bible with only New Testament books, and his wealthy, privileged friends in Rome loved it.

But that's exactly the point: the more comfortable we get in life, the easier it is to dismiss "Old Testament God." Most of us have a reasonable expectation of justice if we're robbed or assaulted. Just call the cops and let them work it out. But there are places in the world where there's no 911. There are places where the cops are the perpetrators, and there's no remedy and no justice. You just have to cope with reality.

That's real life for *most* people in the world today, but it was much, much worse for the Israelites 2,600 years ago. It was a savage and unjust world, with no remedy or recourse for God's most vulnerable children.

We believe God hates violence, but there may be things He hates more than violence, like being separated from His kids. That's what most of the hard-to-read parts of the Bible are really about: the broken heart of a love-sick father, desperate to be reunited with His children, and unspeakably frustrated with those in power who lead His children astray.

Here are a few helpful things to know as you work through today's reading:

- Prior to this passage, Ezekiel points to the heart of the problem in 6:4 – "Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slay your people in front of your *idols*." At the core of every sin is *idolatry*, which means building your identity around something other than God. Ezekiel introduced a fun new word for "idols" in this verse – the Hebrew term *gillulim* which literally meant "dung-gods."
- In the passage immediately after today's reading, Ezekiel's colorful language continues: "Every hand will go limp; every leg will be wet with urine" (7:17). The prophet is describing a disposition of utter powerlessness and dependency.
- 7:13: *The seller will not recover the property*. The extent of the doom upon the nation is such that the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25) will not be celebrated.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What do you think was most upsetting to God?
3. How do people continue to bow before *idols* of our own today? How do we build our identity around something other than God?
4. Given that we still bow down to idols, do you think God's wrath still burns as hot toward us as it did in Ezekiel's day? What changed God's position toward sinners like us?

### **Week 2, Day 4: Ezekiel 8:9-15**

#### **Understanding the Passage**

Have you ever been betrayed by someone close to you? The betrayal of a spouse, close friend, or a family member can cut us to the core. The grief process that a scorned spouse endures following an

affair usually includes shock, an inquisition-style interrogation, rage, sadness, passive aggression, vengeance, and ultimately acceptance and forgiveness (or so we hope). Through these very difficult prophecies, Ezekiel often presents God as a husband who has been deceived by an unfaithful wife (the Hebrew people). Whenever Ezekiel's words make you wince or shake your head, it helps to remember how it feels whenever someone you should be able to trust betrays and humiliates you.

As we learned yesterday, the *betrayal* of the people is their idolatry. Instead of loving and respecting their *husband* (God), they have been stepping out on Him, offering their faith and affection to other gods. For example, in 8:17, the Lord said, "With their backs toward the temple and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east," a clear reference to the ancient Mesopotamian practice of sun worship.

Here are a few helpful things to know as you work through today's reading:

- Many of Ezekiel's hard-to-understand illustrations can be tied back to idolatrous Mesopotamian rituals. It appears that Ezekiel has woven into his illustrations some terms and phrases he borrowed from his contemporary religious, legal, and social life in Babylonia.
- Several of Ezekiel's visions sound similar to what archaeologists have learned about the Mesopotamian Ishtar festival. While in Babylonia, Ezekiel no doubt witnessed the grandiose and, in many respects, obscene Ishtar festival, which featured orgies, child prostitutes, excessive drinking, etc.
- Shocked by what he saw, he drew heavily on the Ishtar cult as the epitome of the ways people stray from the Truth. His message to the Hebrew people: *we are not that different. We too have strayed. We too have been adulterers before God.*

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. How do you think people "cheat on God" these days?
3. Obviously, many people find God's extreme response to the people's sins disturbing. Do you think God's reaction, as told through Ezekiel, was extreme? Why or why not?
4. Where do you find the love of God in passages like this?

### **Week 2, Day 5: Ezekiel 10:1-5, 18-19**

#### **Understanding the Passage**

The temple was the center of Jewish life and religious practice, and it was believed to be the actual, physical home of God. In today's reading, as a result of the people's betrayal, God leaves His home. Once again, Ezekiel is echoing one of the major literary and religious themes of ancient Mesopotamian cultures: the theme of divine abandonment wherein gods forsake their temples. Multiple Sumerian texts dating from 2000-1800 BC point to the fact that their gods have left their temples as the prime cause for their fallen city's misfortune. Without God, the temple is empty and void, and the people are exposed without protection.

How do we make sense of God's actions in Ezekiel's prophecies?

Here are a few helpful things to know as you work through today's reading:

- Just prior to today's reading, God says through Ezekiel, "The sin of the people of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the **land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of injustice**. They say, 'The Lord has forsaken the land; the Lord does not see.' So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done."
- It's important to note that, God can save us from the eternal consequences of our sin, but not always from the temporary consequences. God redeems our past, but He does not necessarily erase our past. We still have to sleep in the beds we make.
- The word *glory* (Hebrew *kabod*) of God alludes to God's visible presence among the people. God's glory is often described as light, and in some parts of the Old Testament, God's glory is seen in a cloud.
- Anytime you struggle to read or understand the Bible, especially the Old Testament, it's really important to read it through the lens of Jesus. In other words, reading Ezekiel now should feel like watching a suspenseful movie for the *second* time. You know how the story ends, so while the details of the movie are still moving and instructive, you don't get swept up in fear because now, for example, you know Bruce Willis was really dead the whole time! When you read Ezekiel, you can rest assured, knowing that Jesus came to resolve the tension the prophet calls out.

#### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why do you think God chooses to let us live with the consequences of our actions? What would be the alternative?
3. Have you ever felt like God's glory has "left the temple"? In other words, have you ever struggled to *see* or *feel* God's presence?
4. How do the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ change the way you read Ezekiel's prophecies?

#### **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. What do you think the Lenten practice of fasting has to do with biblical themes of scarcity, self-denial, siege, and dependence on God?
3. Have you ever felt *cut off* from God? What circumstances led to you feeling that way, and how did you respond? How did God respond?
4. How do people continue to bow before *idols* of our own today? How do we build our identity around something other than God?
5. Given that we still bow down to idols, do you think God's wrath still burns as hot toward us as it did in Ezekiel's day? What changed God's position toward sinners like us?

6. Obviously, many people find God's extreme response to the people's sins disturbing. Do you think God's reaction, as told through Ezekiel, was extreme? Why or why not?
7. Where do you find the love of God in passages like this?
8. Why do you think God chooses to let us live with the consequences of our actions? What would be the alternative?
9. How do the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ change the way you read Ezekiel's prophecies?
10. Would you rather have the good news or the bad news first? How do you think the warnings in Ezekiel still apply to us today?