



LifeLight

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

Ezekiel

LEADERS GUIDE

The Lord, depicted as the Ancient of Days, rides enthroned upon the backs of cherubim—angels with animal features such as wings and other bodily forms (Ezekiel 1, 10). Since Ezekiel’s descriptions of the cherubim are challenging to depict visually, Renaissance artist Raphael depicted them simply as a winged man and beasts (ca. 1518). Next to the Lord, Raphael also placed two “putti,” chubby, cupidlike angelic boys that first appeared in classical Roman art but later became popular in Renaissance art in the fourteenth century. Putti are sometimes called “cherubs,” but they are not at all like the biblical cherubim, who serve God and represent His power over all creation.



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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 8.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;

- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 55.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 55**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion-leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places, some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Study and Worship

Resources

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a most thorough reference guide (pp. lxxv–cx), and over 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

The Concordia Organist is a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009 (order no. 99-2264). Use these CDs for worship hymn accompaniment.

A Priest Called to Prophecy

2 Kings 24–25; Exodus 33; Numbers 12; Matthew 25; Revelation 4–5; 8; 11; 22

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

This introduction to Ezekiel examines the history of the prophet's time, the circumstances of the Israelites in exile, the nuances of Ezekiel's style of prophetic writing, and the book's relationship to similarly styled books in the Old and New Testaments. These themes will be repeated and expanded throughout the entire study.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. recall the events and spiritual significance of Israel's exile into Babylon;
2. gain awareness and appreciation for Ezekiel's viewpoint as a priest; and
3. be ready to apply the book's message to their spiritual and prayer life.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 55.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Most Holy Spirit, open the Word of the Lord to us and inspire our hearts to believe in the one true God by faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Give us both the boldness and the faithfulness of an Ezekiel so that we may cling to the abounding love of our heavenly Father and rely with confidence on the forgiveness of our sins and our life's renewal in His image. Cause us to hear the magnificent truths of Your Word for our good. With a heart for Your saving message, cause us to spread Your Word throughout the world, starting with our neighbors. Lift us up, encourage us, and lead us through Christ into the way that is everlasting. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 A Favored Nation Exiled 2 Kings 24–25

Ezekiel is a challenging book to study and apply. To fully understand this prophet, we need to know his historical context, the style of his writing, and some major theological themes in his book.

When the prophet Daniel looked out of his window in Babylon morning, noon, and evening, he could reflect on what he had suddenly left behind (Daniel 6:10). He had grown up with the holy temple of Jerusalem always in the line of sight; it was the city's greatest feature in its skyline. Now that the Judeans were forced from their homeland, they had to replace the times of temple sacrifice with times of prayer. They would not give up their faith in the Lord, even though Jerusalem was now a far-off memory. Daniel paid no attention to those hostile rivals in Babylon who stalked him, ready to convince the ruler that Daniel's prayer was subversive and illegal. Daniel kept praying anyway, looking west toward Jerusalem, possibly wondering if he would ever see that holy city ever again.

Not far away from Daniel, in one of many Israelite settlements in the land of exile, Ezekiel also cast his thoughts toward the Promised Land. God had taken centuries to warn His rebellious people that He would judge them. The time had finally come to fulfill His threat of punishment. It now seemed that they would know nothing

except God's anger. Faithful Israel would have to live with a constant reminder that too many of their countrymen followed the gods of other nations. God used powerful foreign nations to exact His vengeance. Along with other priests, leaders, and influential people, this young prophet-to-be had been rounded up by King Nebuchadnezzar's army, ensuring that he would not see the temple again. Just like Daniel, praying and looking westward, Ezekiel knew that he had no reason to expect a return to his Judean homeland.

There was yet a third prophet who was alive at this time—Jeremiah. Unlike Daniel or Ezekiel, Jeremiah was left behind in Jerusalem, since the Babylonians conquered the area in stages. Nebuchadnezzar's original intent was to remove just enough "movers and shakers" from Judea in order to keep the people from overthrowing his rule of them. That way, the king of Babylon could profit from tribute payments that he would require from the lands he conquered. So Nebuchadnezzar killed or took away most of the royal family and other leaders, including the young king Jehoiachin. He then elevated Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah to the throne and changed his name to Zedekiah. This was supposed to send him the message that he was to obey his new Babylonian master. Zedekiah was the king with whom Jeremiah spoke the most, though it did not seem that the prophet's message got through to him.

Not only did Zedekiah rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, but he also persisted in doing what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. Jeremiah urged Zedekiah to obey his Babylonian superior, but he would have none of it. Even while the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem, cutting off all their food supply, building mounds and ramps that would allow the soldiers to overtake the city wall, Zedekiah naively thought that he could rely on the help of the Egyptians to repel this massive occupying force. When Zedekiah fled to the south, the Babylonians overtook him, forced him to watch as they killed his sons, and then gouged out his eyes and carted him off to Babylon.

Jerusalem was burned, the temple utterly destroyed, and this time the only people left were the absolute poorest who would barely eke out a living for themselves on the land. When news of the holy city's destruction reached the exiles already in Babylon, they were heartbroken. They needed a message from Ezekiel, and the Lord granted him a word that was more than "I told you so." Instead, God revealed a glimmer of hope and restoration. But these blessings would not be realized without

repentance and a renewed trust in the Lord's promises. In the lives and circumstances of these three prophets, we discover what life was like for the people of God in the tumultuous sixth century BC.

2 Visions and Parables

Exodus 33; Numbers 12

About 1,400 years earlier, God had chosen Abraham, an Aramean wanderer, to be the father of many nations. God revealed His covenant promises to him. Through a vision, the Lord commanded Abraham to look up into the clear night sky so he could see that his descendants would be more numerous than all those stars. The Lord promised Abraham that from Isaac, his son, would issue a multitude. Then, as darkness fell, the Lord ordered Abraham to sacrifice several animals at once. He would cut the larger ones in halves, with each piece across from the other, creating an aisle. Abraham may have been familiar with this practice, since two parties who were going to strike up an agreement would typically lay out the terms of the contract, then cut an animal in half and walk in between the bloody pieces. This ritual, which the Hebrews called "cutting a covenant," would essentially say, "If I break my promise with you, may I receive the same fate as these animals." At just the time when Abraham may have been wondering, "How is the invisible God going to walk in between these pieces?" there appeared a visible form. In the darkness, a smoking fire pot and blazing torch performed the ritual equivalent of "signing the dotted line" by passing between the pieces in order to assure Abraham that the Lord would make good on His promises.

Through another cloud and fire a few centuries later, Abraham's children left Egypt and reclaimed the Promised Land. Through a burning bush, the Lord summoned their unsuspecting leader, Moses, for his great task. At the holy mountain of Sinai, cloud and fire would bear witness to God's presence with His chosen people. Once the tabernacle was completed, then these signs found their home in the holy places where sacrifice and worship was to take place. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night protected the people when they passed through the Red Sea and led them as they wandered and camped in the wilderness.

And it was Moses who was given the privilege to look upon God's form in a vision. When Aaron and Miriam challenged Moses' right to speak for the Lord, the God of Israel answered them and said that visions and dreams are the usual way that He speaks to prophets.

(Numbers 12:7–8) Not so with My servant Moses. He is faithful in all My house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD.

The form of the Lord that Moses was granted to see was ironically His “back side,” after He protected Moses in the cleft of the rock while His “glory” or uncovered majesty passed by (Exodus 33:12–23). Up to the time when Christ came, “No one [had] ever seen God” (John 1:18); however, it was Moses who was allowed to get closest to that point.

As we study Ezekiel, we will see visions of the Lord—especially His magnificent throne set atop supernatural wheels and heavenly creatures. We may note that, for many, it was truly a frightful prospect to see the unveiled majesty of Almighty God. For example, Jacob was astounded that he would see God’s face—even wrestle with Him!—and live. Isaiah cried out, (Isaiah 6:5) “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and . . . my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” God’s grace, the power of His forgiveness for sinful man, gave these prophets and saints access. God allowed Ezekiel to see His glory. Yet, Ezekiel could not presume to describe fully the heavenly sights that his eyes beheld. That is why his book constantly uses approximations such as the words “like,” “likeness,” and “appearance”: “the likeness of a throne . . . a likeness with a human appearance.”

The message that the Lord gives to His chosen prophets can often appear in parables and action prophecies. For example, the Lord commanded Nathan to reprove King David for his adultery and murder by telling him a story about a rich man who stole a precious ewe lamb from a poor man and killed it for a feast. David’s anger was so great against the man that he condemned himself! In contrast, the Lord did not command Hosea to tell a parable but to live as one instead. As a picture of God’s love for Israel, who was unfaithful to the Lord through idol worship, Hosea was ordered to love his unfaithful wife. As we will see in the coming weeks, Ezekiel will have some strange, stomach-turning, and even heart-breaking parables and actions as part of his prophetic ministry.

3 A Priest’s Perspective

Imagine Ezekiel unrolling the great scroll of the Book of Leviticus. As he looks reverently over the book, he comes upon the section that gives God’s directions on

how to ordain priests. The new priest, at thirty years old, was to be bathed. He was robed with coat and sash and ornate decorations that were signs of a priest’s solemn dedication to the Lord. The high priest dabbed sacrificial ram’s blood on the candidate’s right ear, thumb, and foot. Finally, anointing oil would cascade upon all the candidates consecrated for service. They would eat together the holy bread and meat reserved for them. For seven days, the new priests would stay apart from the rest of the people until their ordination was complete.

From the opening words of Ezekiel’s prophecy, it appears that he was thirty years old, the age of consecration. We don’t know for sure whether he was properly ordained during the siege of Jerusalem. Because he was a potential leader of the people, the Babylonians took him away to Babylon. They forced him to leave his career at the temple, God’s promised place for His gifts, and the location where Ezekiel thought he would serve the Lord throughout his life. The ordination ceremony that Ezekiel could read from Leviticus could no longer hallow him. Now that he was hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem, what would be the use for all the study he had done? With no temple for the Lord in Babylon, what could the priests of the Lord do? As noted above, Daniel could look out his window in the direction of Jerusalem and pray three times a day—he could do that from anywhere. Ezekiel, on the other hand, lost the life and work to which he was born.

Thankfully, the Lord had in mind another plan for this young would-be priest. In the magnificent vision of Ezekiel 1, God introduced him to the glory that the temple could only replicate on a small scale. This appearance of the divine majesty impressed upon Ezekiel that the Lord could, in fact, be present for the good of His people even in the land of exile. The temple building was only an earthly shadow, nothing more. It was indeed a holy place, not of itself but because the Lord promised to be there. Since the Babylonians forced the people to move away, the Lord would make a new promise. Using prophets like Ezekiel, He would grace His chosen people with His Word and encourage their faith through the promise of a Messiah, who would fulfill His plan since the world began.

The time was getting closer to the great day when the Son of David would appear as the true presence of the Lord—not in a stone temple but in actual human flesh. His sacrifice on the cross would replace all the animal sacrifices that would point the peoples’ faith to Him. It goes without saying that heaven and earth could not

contain the Lord. But, as Ezekiel was soon to find out, God's promises of forgiveness and everlasting life would prove to be just as big as the awe-inspiring majesty of a throne riding a supernatural storm.

Throughout Ezekiel's recorded ministry, we will observe his attention to Old Testament priestly details. He will remain sensitive to issues of clean and unclean, and painstakingly record the dimensions of a temple for the new era. His emphases on sacrifices and liturgy may distinguish him from prophets like Jeremiah. Yet, such details help us see that God's Word is not some disembodied message that was planted in a prophet's mind. Having a priest serve as a prophet brings in clearer focus for his hearers how Christ Jesus would accomplish forgiveness of sins for the whole world as the Word become flesh. In this respect, the Book of Hebrews complements the Book of Ezekiel with a similar liturgical outlook as it proclaims our Savior who opened for us a new and living way to eternal life with God through the "curtain" of His flesh (Hebrews 10:19–22).

4 A Watchman of the Apocalypse

Matthew 25

What is an apocalypse? From popular TV shows and movies, the term usually stands for a widespread destruction that changes the world forever. Everything from alien zombies to nuclear fallout to massive tsunamis of snow and ice may be the proposed means of destruction, and we are entertained by folks who prepare for the worst in their own unique ways. On one hand, they are adamant that whatever is coming, it will be the end of the world; yet, on the other hand, they still plan on sitting it out in an underground bunker. They hope to venture back into the world to make a new start. They must think that they can escape even the end of the world!

An *apocalypse* is actually an "uncovering" of what God had formerly kept hidden. It means a "revelation" and, in fact, the last book of the Bible goes by the Greek title "Apocalypse of John." Of course, that book includes devastating worldwide battles and catastrophes. But these are symbols by which the Lord *reveals* who He is and what His plan of salvation means for believers. Every time He communicated with His servants the prophets and gave them a heavenly message for all who would hear, that was a revelation, an apocalypse. Whether it was by a firm, chastising hand or by His forgiving mercy, God wanted to make Himself known.

Ezekiel is well-known for the phrase "Then they (or you) will know that I am the LORD." He uses it over seventy times. "Knowing the Lord" is not simply recalling facts or information about Him. It refers to an intimate experience of God's work and a realization that He is both the almighty Judge and the merciful Savior. Those who reject Him and refuse His salvation will finally know the Lord through their own condemnation. Those who repent and turn to the Lord through faith in the Messiah will have close personal knowledge of His steadfast love. Both His threats and His promises reveal who He is, but it is the fulfillment of His gracious will that gives us the full and complete picture of our Lord. He longs for us to have unwavering faith in Him.

Another end-times motif that is strong in the Book of Ezekiel is that of the watchman. Whenever the attack of an enemy—spiritual or physical—seemed imminent, God would reveal it first to His servant the watchman. With untiring eyes, the prophet would see the threat coming. His duty was to sound the alarm of repentance to the people. Whether they would follow His warning, believe, and be spared the destruction of deserved wrath was not Ezekiel's concern. Provided that his assigned task was complete, the prophet-watchman was not held accountable for those who disregarded his warning. But if he was derelict in his duty, then the death of a sinner would be charged as bloodguilt against the prophet, as if it were actually Ezekiel who had mass-murdered the people simply because he did not warn them as God commanded! Paul wrote: (1 Corinthians 9:16) "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel." Ezekiel would have identified with that heavy responsibility, which is the same for every preacher of God's Word.

As the end draws closer and the world degenerates into deeper and deeper apostasy, Ezekiel's kind of faithfulness to the Word will become increasingly difficult to accomplish for the Lord's servants. Yet, it is all the more necessary for the children of God to hear the watchman's word, repent, and be saved.

5 From Ezekiel to Revelation

Revelation 4–5; 8; 11; 22

As we are about to wade through the visions, parables, and symbols of Ezekiel, we may begin to take notice along the way of the similarities between this Old Testament prophet's work and the Book of Revelation, which the apostle John wrote during an exile on the Greek island of Patmos. The four living creatures (or "cherubim") appear again in Revelation. The throne of al-

mighty God swoops in on a cloud, and lightning flashes forth from His dreadful presence, just as in Ezekiel. In Revelation, though, the scene widens to include more in the heavenly vision.

There is usually a healthy interest and curiosity to study the Book of Revelation because it is so different from the other books of the New Testament. One finds no lack of devastating apocalyptic catastrophes and epic battles full of monsters. Computer-graphic imagery today could possibly put these larger-than-life visions on film. Even though the visions of Revelation and Ezekiel describe the way God sees all of His creation's history, they include much that has to do with you as well as the future end of the world. So tear into Ezekiel's mysterious book and realize its deep connections with both testaments, the end, and you.

Other apocalyptic books such as Daniel, Zechariah, and parts of Isaiah are very helpful for explaining what goes on in Revelation. Ezekiel especially provides a window into the worship life of Israel that is depicted in the intricate liturgy of Revelation 4–5. Babylon reminds Ezekiel's hearers of the treacherous idolatry that ushered in their exile, but that wicked, lustful city is condemned and destroyed in Revelation. The measuring of the temple in Revelation 11 receives a detailed explanation in Ezekiel 40–48. Since water issues from the temple in Ezekiel, look for the same life-giving river to flow through Revelation 22.

It is preferable to allow Scripture to explain and interpret itself so that the Bible, and not some expert or commentary, becomes our primary guide. This approach also safeguards against foreign, counterproductive interpretations. With the help of Ezekiel, the symbols, visions, and events of Revelation are actually easier to comprehend with the rest of the Bible's teaching.

Conclusion

Now that we have an introduction to the historical context, the style of writing, and some general theological themes of Ezekiel, we are ready to delve into the book itself. God did not intend for His Word through this man to remain stuck in Babylon, buried with the bones of the unfortunate Judean exiles. Instead, we rejoice that He gave us in our day a prophet who would call God's Church of all times to repentance and faith, and prepare us to worship Him with purified hearts.

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 2.

Heavenly Vision in the Land of Exile

Ezekiel 1–2

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The opening chapters of Ezekiel are captivating. A vision of God's glorious majesty, never before described in so much brilliant detail, mesmerizes us. God commissions a young priest to proclaim His Word to a rebellious house of Israel living in the land of exile. So intimate would Ezekiel be with the messages of judgment and of promise that the Lord actually commanded him to eat the scroll on which they were written! This sets the stage for even more bizarre prophetic actions that lay ahead.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. identify Ezekiel's first vision as a revelation of God's glory;
2. compare it to other visible appearances of our Lord, ultimately in Christ Himself; and
3. be introduced to the specific mandate of prophetic work that He gave to Ezekiel.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 58.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Almighty God, who dwells in unapproachable light upon a majestic throne, we recognize that we are unworthy to see the fullness of Your glory. Yet, You have sent us Your only Son, who has shared in Your eternal glory since before the beginning of the world. He made You known to us, not in a blinding vision of justice, but in the humble form of a servant. We ask that You would forgive and purify us with the precious blood of Jesus, so that we may ascend the hill of the Lord and praise You as Your holy and redeemed creation. Speak to us Your powerful Word, send us to our callings as Your light in the world, and prepare our hearts for that great day when we will finally see You as You truly are, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 Four Living Creatures

Ezekiel 1

The Gospel-writer John pronounced triumphantly, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The glory that the eyewitnesses to Jesus saw in His flesh was revealed long before, on a steamy summer day, to a young priest living in the land of exile. God appeared in splendor to Ezekiel as He commissioned a thirty-year-old exile to become His prophet to a displaced people. The vision was so stunning that Ezekiel could hardly find adequate words to describe it, even with the help of the Holy Spirit. If the apostle John were to describe Ezekiel's experience, he might have written, "You know that tremendous display of heavenly glory that Ezekiel saw with trembling knees? Well, we have seen that very same glory walking around among us in human flesh! Ezekiel saw a vision that came and went; we saw Jesus Christ Himself, and we have talked with God!" The appearance of our Lord and Savior on this earth was clearly the climax of biblical revelation and the world's history. For Jesus told His disciples: "Many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Matthew 13:17). Yet, we

better understand that revelation when we understand what the prophet Ezekiel saw and heard.

Consider what God allowed Ezekiel to see along the Chebar canal just five years after the Babylonians took him and his companions captive. His experience of the Lord's absolute majesty was truly exceptional among the prophets. Ezekiel saw visions that rivaled the likes of Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah. Of course, we're talking about the one and same Lord appearing and speaking to all of these Old Testament saints. Moses was covered by the divine hand in the cleft of the rock; Elijah was whisked away in a chariot of fire; Isaiah had his lips touched with a fiery coal; yet, the same God also uniquely appeared to Ezekiel. Through Christ, God came in the fullness of time as the Word made flesh. No matter where we turn in the pages of the Old or New Testaments, we are beholding the glory of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God.

A wind storm introduced Ezekiel's vision. But this was not going to be simply another intense, Persian Gulf storm. This storm turned out to be God's personal self-revelation, a larger and more frightful version, perhaps, of the pillar of cloud that led the people of Israel in the wilderness by day and the pillar of fire that stood guard over the tabernacle by night. From this fiery, bright metallic nucleus would come the enigmatic four living creatures that some other biblical authors saw.

What are these creatures, and what are they doing? Ezekiel can write only what human language will allow him to communicate. Isaiah and John heard these four living creatures singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" to the Lord. Sometimes they are given the name *seraphim* to distinguish them from the angels that are sent as messengers to mankind, and to highlight their burning, white-hot appearance. Their assigned purpose and place is to represent all of creation worshiping in the immediate presence of the Lord on His throne. One commentator wrote:

The specific forms of the faces seem to represent the crown of four aspects of God's creation: man is the crown of all creation, and thus this face is first and forward; the lion and the ox are supreme among the wild and the domestic animals, respectively; and the eagle is preeminent among birds. (Horace D. Hummel, *Concordia Commentary: Ezekiel 1–20* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2005], 58)

A spirit accompanies the living creatures and moves them back and forth as it wills, revealing that an even greater Spirit is also present who controls the whole vision; namely, the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

2 Wheels within Wheels

Ezekiel 1

Do you think that the local tire shop will start carrying wheels with intersecting rims? Perhaps the options could be wheels with or without eyes! As Ezekiel sees more of this vision unfold along the Babylonian canal, he describes a vehicle or rolling platform that can go in any direction it wants without having to turn on a common axle. This is the ultimate concept in mobility—greater even than those cars that can parallel-park or drive themselves! Nothing can move with better ease or in a more immediate response to the driver's will. Each living creature had its own wheel, operating in perfect tandem with its quick and nimble movements. They were unified by one and the same spirit (the Hebrew word can also be translated as "wind" or "breath"), so there is no conflict of wills as they move in any direction as well as up and down.

So what are the eyes for? An open eye is generally understood as an indicator of being alive, conscious, and perceptive of everything in its line of sight. Since in Ezekiel's description the wheels are "full of eyes all around," even such objects that are lifeless in our this-worldly experience are alive in this heavenly vision of God's glory. The wheels themselves are all-seeing, perceiving everything around them all at once. These, too, are only creatures of God, but they exhibit features, such as omniscience (knowing and perceiving all things) that draw attention and praise to their Creator. These wheels are truly awesome in that they inspire in Ezekiel and in all who read and hear his account the awe-filled worship of the Lord God Almighty.

How does Scripture describe the symbolic significance of eyes? You may have heard the saying that "the eye is the window of the soul," but that can be found only in secular literature. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that the eye is "the lamp of the body" (Matthew 6:22–24). He describes a "healthy" eye in the same way that He talks about laying up treasures on earth. So there may be a certain way that believers look, especially when someone looks at their eyes, when they are full of confident trust in the Lord. By contrast, a "bad"

eye makes the whole body full of darkness, which is like storing treasures of faith on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal. In the Old Testament, Job complained, “My eye has grown dim from vexation, and all my members are like a shadow” (Job 17:7).

God’s eyes, on the other hand, have divine powers to test man as well as to help him. “Keep me as the apple of Your eye” (Psalm 17:8) is a prayer that assumes our heavenly Father’s utmost care and protection for His faithful children. “The boastful shall not stand before [the Lord’s] eyes,” according to Psalm 5:5; yet, it is also true that “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayer” (1 Peter 3:12).

3 A “Vision” of Sound *Ezekiel 1*

Without a doubt, this vision beside the canal has already overwhelmed Ezekiel. Yet, the young priest managed to direct his attention above these four magnificent flying creatures and their corresponding wheels. An expanse or dome spreads out above them, as though Ezekiel is looking at yet another stretch of sky as the vision unfolds. It shines with a brilliance that he describes as “awe-inspiring,” and this expanse gleams like light piercing through crystal.

While Ezekiel’s gaze is momentarily averted, he also hears a sound. As he looks for its source, the prophet returns his eyes to the wings of the four living creatures. Now, if you’re wondering whether it’s a “sound” or it’s a “voice” that Ezekiel hears, it should be noted that the Hebrew word for both is exactly the same. Just as the visual aspects overwhelmed Ezekiel’s sense of sight, so also the roaring din that accompanies this vision overwhelms his ears. He compares the sound to three things: a roar of many waters, the voice of Almighty God in all His unbridled majesty, and the sound of an army engaged in wild combat. The appearance of a violent windstorm is likely still surrounding and swirling around all of this revelation.

There is yet one more part of Ezekiel’s inaugural vision, and this is the greatest, most exalted part of the entire revelation. Above the creatures, above the wheels, above the expanse and, bringing to silence the flood of sound that Ezekiel hears, there comes into view an appearance of a man sitting on a throne. Nothing can adequately describe this figure except brightness: gleaming, glowing metal above the waist and a burning, rainbowlike brilliance from the waist down. The vast expanse ap-

pears below the seated personage, as though it were merely His ottoman cushion supported by the creatures and the wheels. This depiction of God’s glory—His greatness and majesty—unequivocally declares His total rule over the expanse of all that He created. He is also omnipresent, capable of going in all four directions of the universe simultaneously, without turning.

In contrast with God’s reign from this throne, the last Judean king was wrenched away from his throne in Jerusalem and the temple was deserted. Despite the destruction of Judah, the exalted Lord is still the King of all kings. “Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool,” (Isaiah 66:1) He says. Even in faraway Babylon, God is “large and in charge!” It was supposed for a very long time in most ancient Near Eastern cultures that deities resided and exercised their powers only in their particular locality. Even the god named Allah, before Muhammad came on the scene in the early seventh century AD, was considered only a local god whose powers were confined to a certain place. At least some of the banished Israelite exiles may have concluded that the Lord was now out of their reach. They were about a thousand miles from Jerusalem; perhaps they may have thought or said something like, “How could our God do anything to help us way out here?” Once they hear of Ezekiel’s grand vision of the glory of the Lord, they would have no excuse to doubt that “His kingdom [will] stretch from shore to shore Till moons shall wax and wane no more” (LSB 832:1).

4 Rebellion Personified *Ezekiel 2*

The sights and sounds of Ezekiel’s extraordinary vision have given way for a moment so divine speech may take center stage. This was the reason Ezekiel built up the report to a certain climax. As wonderful as this whole vision is to behold, there is about to happen something more truly worthy of our full attention. Ezekiel experienced all that he saw and heard that day so that he could receive this specific call from the Lord Himself into the prophetic ministry.

(Ezekiel 2:1) “Son of man”—you have heard this phrase before. Jesus uses it to describe Himself more than any other title. Ezekiel records it ninety-three times. When the Lord called out to Moses and to Abraham in the past, He used their names. But not so with Ezekiel. The prophet barely records his own name, since almost the entire book is written in first-person (“I”, “me”) form. The Lord is not humiliating Ezekiel by calling him “son

of man." Instead, this title highlights the great task that God gives him. The word for "man" is the Hebrew word *adam*, which recalls the first man through whom came both life and the curse of death for all people who have ever existed on earth. Even though Ezekiel inhabits the lowly, sinful flesh that is typical of a "son of Adam," he is still given a pure and precious Word from the Lord that will bring new life to all who hear and believe, as we will see in a dramatic way in the upcoming vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37).

An example may help us understand Ezekiel's title as "son of man." A pastor traditionally wears a uniform that calls attention to a truth about the Office of the Holy Ministry. A black, unornamented shirt admits symbolically that the pastor himself is a sinner. However, around his neck, or at least right at his throat, is seen a white collar that joyfully confesses, "I have a Word to preach; not my own word, but the pure and untainted Word of God." If a pastor were to insert his own opinions and do injustice to the Word that he was called to preach, then he would at the very least undercut any useful symbolic value that his uniform would have. So the clerical collar is a daily reminder to the preacher of the Word, as if to tell him, "Even though you are a sinful, lowly son of man, you have a Word to proclaim that brings forgiveness and life to all who will hear you. Stay true to that Word."

Sadly, that does not guarantee that everybody will hear a preacher of the Word with a glad and joyful heart. Many will hear and, thanks to the Holy Spirit's grace alone, they will believe. But many also will resist the Word and rebel against God their Creator and Savior. That's what Ezekiel needs to brace for as he begins his ministry among his fellow Israelite exiles in Babylon. He is sent to God's chosen people, to be sure. But they have become the worst version of themselves. As a "nations of rebels," their apostasy makes them no different than any Gentile nation. The Lord constantly calls them a "rebellious house," or literally, a "house of rebellion."

In ancient Israel, a "house" was a family line, a dynasty that hands down to succeeding generations the privileges of God's solemn promises, dating back all the way to Abraham and even to Adam before him. Although the Babylonians carted the Judeans away from the Promised Land into exile, the new generation that Ezekiel addresses has still not repented of the idolatry and gross disobedience that brought on divine punishment. They have actually become rebellion personified. The corruption of their sin is so deep that now it is rebellion, in-

stead of God's promises, that this "house" will pass on to its descendants.

5 Eat This Scroll

Ezekiel 2

Ezekiel is now about to participate in the vision that he is seeing and hearing. His diet takes a dramatic turn! His experience may remind you of people who take the challenge to eat some very strange, exotic, and usually stomach-churning cuisine. John the Baptist's locusts and wild honey may appear as ordinary comfort food in comparison to what Ezekiel will have to put in his mouth!

His culinary adventure begins with eating a dry scroll. This is no mere symbol of listening closely; this is actually ingesting the seemingly inedible object that the hand of the Lord extends to the prophet. The Lord will make it possible for the young man to follow this strange order. God's ancient command, "Hear, O Israel" from Deuteronomy now proceeds to Ezekiel so that His Word will not die out. Rather, it is to feed and nourish those who belong to the rebellious house, yet who will be saved by faith from their wicked generation. For that to take place, His spokesman must have the Holy Word in his heart and coming forth from his mouth. If that means eating the scroll, then that's what has to be done.

The words of the scroll were written on both sides of the papyrus. It was common for prophets, even going back to before Ezekiel's time, to write down the prophecies that they received from the mouth of the Lord. The other prophets didn't always have these vivid visions; nor were they all asked to eat scrolls. Scribes would fill a long, continuous piece of papyrus with columns of handwritten text, and then they would unroll it again and flip it onto the back side, so that they could record more in the same volume. If Ezekiel did not write down the inspired words himself, he employed the services of a scribe, as in the case Jeremiah and his servant Baruch.

The scroll that Ezekiel ate was filled with "words of lamentation and mourning and woe"—bad news. Indeed, God often called the prophets to render His harsh judgment. But the Lord also gave them His promises shining through, like sunshine breaking through the clouds. Even though most of the words on this mournful scroll might likely see their way into the upcoming chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy, we should probably not assume that the whole book is here presented in this one vision. The Holy Spirit is most assuredly the true author of all books of Scripture, even though in the mystery of inspi-

ration, He is still able to grant the human authors the freedom to use their own particular styles and vocabulary while they record the message that is truly God's Word from beginning to end.

It may have surprised Ezekiel, once he got over the initial shock of eating a scroll, that such serious and negative-sounding words would actually taste so good. Most preachers would want to avoid repeating any words of judgment—finicky hearers are accustomed to satisfying their own “itching ears.” But Ezekiel welcomes the taste of honey, as he learns from this experience that his joy in the preaching office will come from his Lord, rather than from the vain acclamations of his hearers. To be sure, the Lord commands laypeople to show appreciation and care for their pastors, for “the laborer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). Yet, even that should be considered as a reward from God Himself, and not a selfish grab for personal wealth and worldly prestige.

Conclusion

At thirty years old, the prophet Ezekiel experiences his first vision of the unbridled glory of God. The purpose of this appearance is to confer on him a sacred task, originating with the Word of the Lord. He will see these other-worldly beings and the exalted throne of God again, but for now Ezekiel's duty is to eat the Lord's message—literally—and proclaim it to a rebellious house of fellow exiles. Whether they hear or refuse to hear, God's preacher must still preach, and he will have no reason to fear, no matter what may happen to him.

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 3.