

# KNOWING GOD THROUGH EZEKIEL

A well-known businessman recently said that in spite of all his wealth and fame he is a troubled man. He worries about the future of our planet. He fears a nuclear holocaust, a disaster caused by pollution, or a plague that is resistant to all known medicine.

I do not share his fear that all life will end through a natural catastrophe. I believe the Bible when it says that an unseen God is in control and that the future will play out according to the predictions of the prophets of the nation of Israel. Ezekiel is one of those prophets who speaks strangely but eloquently to the fears and hopes that mark our day. His words are both timely and insightful for our generation. *Herb Vander Lugt*

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# WAS EZEKIEL MENTALLY UNBALANCED?

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A few years ago, an articulate and successful salesman told me that on several occasions he had seen a flying saucer in a field near his house. I found myself wondering about his mental stability. I understand, therefore, the questions of those who wonder about the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel who said he repeatedly witnessed flashing, many-eyed wheels within wheels, and strange four-faced living creatures.

We naturally question those whose beliefs don't seem normal. Sometimes, however, our doubts also say something about ourselves. Charles Colson writes about a Federal Judge who ruled that a death-row inmate named Johnny Cockrum is mentally unbalanced. After Johnny experienced a spiritual conversion, he wouldn't let his attorneys lie in an effort to get his death penalty commuted. Even though court psychologists argue that Johnny is sane, it's difficult for the judge to believe that the new Johnny would rather die than lie.

A stronger case can be made for Ezekiel. His book is arranged in an orderly way and is marked by deep insights into the nature of God, human experience, and the relationship between individual and group responsibility. What Ezekiel says is intimately tied to the history and future of the nation of Israel and is remarkably relevant to us in our day. As a study of his prophecy shows, Ezekiel was more than sane. He saw God and life far more clearly than those who thought he was mad.

# BOOK CHART OF EZEKIEL

EZEKIEL'S VISION, CALL, AND COMMISSION	SIGNIFICANT SIGNS AND JUDGMENT SERMONS	DEPRESSING TEMPLE VISION AND GOD'S RELUCTANT DEPARTURE	JERUSALEM'S SINS PORTRAYED AND HER INEVITABLE FALL DECLARED	JUDGMENT AND HOPE IN ALLEGORY, FABLE, PROVERB, AND LAMENT	NEWS OF JERUSALEM'S FALL AND DEATH OF EZEKIEL'S WIFE	JUDGMENT PROPHECIES ON NEIGHBORING NATIONS	JUDGMENT PROPHECIES ON EGYPT	PROPHECIES OF ISRAEL'S DELIVERANCE, REPENTANCE, AND RESTORATION	PROPHECIES OF MILLENNIAL LAND, CITY, AND TEMPLE
1 3	4 7	8 11	12 15	16 23	24	25 28	29 32	33 39	40 48
Judah's Fall						Judah's Enemies		Judah's Future	
Before the Siege						During the Siege		After the Siege	
Condemnation of Judah						Condemnation of the Nations		Consolation for Judah	
Judgment								Restoration	
From 593 – 588 BC						587– 586		586 – 572	

“I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,” says the Lord GOD, “when I am hallowed in you before their eyes” (Ezekiel 36:23).

# KNOWING GOD THROUGH EZEKIEL

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Ezekiel's visions happened in a region now occupied by the modern nation of Iraq. The time, by our calendar, would have been late June 593 BC. Five years had passed since invaders from Babylon had entered Jerusalem and taken Ezekiel and a group of his fellow Israelites captive. The final Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC was still 7 years away.

In Babylon, the Jewish prisoners of war had been treated surprisingly well. They were given decent housing and a good deal of freedom. They were allowed to practice their trades and to work the fertile fields allocated to them.

All was not well, however. Many of the captives were not satisfied with a comfortable existence in a pagan land. They longed for the temple in Jerusalem and wondered why their God remained silent and unresponsive to their needs.

## **THE VISION SOME HAVE CALLED A UFO**

Ezekiel was about to see that the God of Israel was still in control. On the banks of an irrigation canal called the river Chebar, the prophet saw a bright object approaching from the north. He would later describe it as a cloud of fire with glowing metal at the center, huge intersecting wheels with rims full of eyes, and with four living creatures who flashed back and forth without turning.

Some have suggested that Ezekiel was actually describing an ancient UFO similar to those reported

in our day. They note that Ezekiel described wheels within wheels that enabled them to move back and forth or sideways without having to turn.

Although similar to a UFO, what Ezekiel saw was far more than an extraterrestrial craft. Above the four living creatures was an expanse resembling chrysolite or sparkling ice. Above the “sparkling ice” was a huge sapphire-like throne. Seated above the throne was One with the appearance of a man (1:22-28).

Ezekiel did not have to wonder about the source of the vision. According to the prophet, “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking” (v.28).

What Ezekiel heard the voice say, he would write. But because there were no direct words for what he saw, he adopted the language of poetic symbolism. That’s why he used the words *like*, *likeness*, and *appearance* a total of 29 times.

**The Living Creatures.** The four living creatures Ezekiel saw in the fire (vv.5-14) are identified as “cherubim” in Ezekiel 10. Each had four faces: the face of a lion, a man, an ox, and an eagle. Each had four wings. Under the wings each creature had hands like those of a man.

Some of the early Church Fathers connected the four faces with the four Gospels. If these early interpreters were correct, the cherubim of Ezekiel’s vision reflect four sides of God’s character, all of which were expressed in Israel’s Messiah. He would express the the servant heart of God (Mark, ox); the Person whose likeness we bear (Luke, man); the kingly authority of our God (Matthew, lion); and the loftiness of His deity (John, eagle).

Many contemporary scholars see the four-faced cherubim as angelic servant representatives of all creation. If all creation is in view, then the cherubim are a reminder that the world is not out of control. The lion is not too strong, the eagle is not too lofty, the man is not too clever, and the ox is not too lowly to be under the control of the One on the throne.

**Wheels Within Wheels.** Under the cloud of fire, Ezekiel saw four huge wheels, each with another wheel inside it set at a right angle. Even though the supernatural workings of these wheels are beyond our ability to understand, their responsiveness to the spirit of the cherubim is clear (1:20). The wheels enabled the chariot-throne to go straight in any direction without turning, “wherever the spirit wanted to go” (v.20). At the will of God the cherubim moved, and at the will of the cherubim the chariot-throne moved swiftly and unerringly for the accomplishment of God’s purposes.

The God of the vision had not been defeated by the gods of the Babylonians. He was the Lord of lords who made the power and glory of Babylon look insignificant by comparison.

From our perspective, it may sometimes appear that evil people keep God’s will from being done. But from His perspective, nothing happens that He has not foreseen and permitted and worked into His plan. All of history is His story. In the face of the terrible events that would soon befall Jerusalem, Ezekiel needed this assurance. So do we!

**The Seeing Rims.** The rims of the wheels were “full of eyes, all around the four of them” (v.18). These eyes undoubtedly symbolize an all-seeing God, reminding us that nothing is hidden from His sight or

transpires without His knowledge (Prov. 15:3; Zech. 3:9; 4:10; Rev. 4:6). This truth comforts the obedient but troubles the rebellious.

**The Human Likeness On The Throne.** Above the “chariot of fire,” and above the crystal-like expanse overhead, Ezekiel saw “the likeness of a throne” and on the throne the “likeness of a man.” This human-like occupant of the throne undoubtedly symbolizes the One who made us in His own image.

Ezekiel’s vision reminds us that while we are made in God’s likeness, we are also very unlike Him. The transcendence of the One on the throne comes through in the guarded language, “the likeness with the appearance of a man.” “The likeness” was permeated with and surrounded by a glowing fire that produced the colors of the rainbow. The portrait blended dazzling splendor with a stark lack of detail. The effect on Ezekiel was profound. Like Moses before him, he fell on his face in worship (v.28).

#### **SEEING GOD**

- The four faces of the cherubim show that all of creation is under God’s control.
- The wheels of Ezekiel’s vision show that God’s power causes His will to be done on earth.
- The eyes on the wheels show that God’s sovereignty and power are carried out with perfect understanding and wisdom.
- The human appearance on the throne reminds us that God has made us in His own likeness, and therefore can personally relate to us.

#### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- In Ezekiel’s need for this vision, we see our tendency to think that God has forgotten us and that He is not in control.

## THE PROPHET WHO COULDN'T SPEAK

Ezekiel's vision began with an encouraging display of a God who is in control. What followed was difficult for the prophet to accept. The voice from the throne told Ezekiel that God was making him a watchman for a people who would not listen (3:17). The voice told the prophet not to expect these people to listen to his warnings, for they had not been willing to listen to God Himself (2:3).

To emphasize the bitter nature of what God was asking Ezekiel to do, the Lord gave him a scroll and told him to eat it (3:1). Many years later God would ask another prophet to do the same thing (Rev. 10:9-10). In both visions the outcome was the same. Although the taste was sweet, when the prophets realized that the words they had "eaten" were words of severe judgment, the scrolls turned bitter in their stomachs.

Ezekiel was stunned. Returning to the banks of the river Chebar outside Babylon, he was in a state of shock and sat silently among his fellow-exiles for 7 days. On the eighth day, God spoke to the prophet again. He told Ezekiel He was going to cause his tongue to cleave to the roof of his mouth (3:26), except on occasions when He gave him words to say. Ezekiel was to become a prophet who couldn't speak, except when the Lord opened his mouth.

**The Model Of War.** Then God commanded Ezekiel to make a drawing on a clay brick. The Lord wanted His prophet to draw the outline of the city of Jerusalem. As children use toy soldiers to simulate battle, the prophet was to arrange weapons depicting the city in a state of siege. Ezekiel was to lie next to this model on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days.

Word of the prophet's strange behavior began to spread. Curious people came to Ezekiel's courtyard to see him lying on his side speechless as Jerusalem was depicted under siege.

Scholars agree that the 430 days of Ezekiel's silent drama represent 430 years. They probably represent the time the Israelites would be under the control of Gentile powers—from the deportation of Jehoiakin in 597 BC until the beginning of the Maccabean rebellion in 167 BC. Other time periods have been suggested, but none of them allow a literal interpretation of the passage.

**The Shaved Head.** The second act in Ezekiel's drama was also humiliating for the prophet. Using a sword, he shaved his hair and beard, and then divided his shaved hair into three piles. He burned the first pile, chopped up the second with a sword, and scattered the third pile of hair to the wind. Then he retrieved a few strands, some of which he tucked into the folds of his clothing, and some he burned.

This time, however, God gave Ezekiel words to explain what he was doing. He expressed the meaning of his actions by declaring that in the siege of Jerusalem a third of her citizens would die from pestilence and famine, a third would be killed by the sword, and a third would flee in terror (5:12). A remnant of the surviving third would be preserved for return from exile. But even among them, some would be judged because of unbelief.

The prophecy warned of the invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Israel was about to suffer a level of destruction that seems impossible for a people loved and chosen by God.

Ezekiel's inability to speak whenever he wanted to

lasted 8 years, from 593 BC until the day he received word that Jerusalem had been captured (33:21-22) in 585 BC. Even in his supernaturally imposed silence, the prophet gave evidence of God's tender mercy toward the Israelites. His inability to speak was a sign that the hand of God was on him—a strong reason for his people to wonder why this well-known prophet wasn't talking.

Ezekiel's prophecy, however, shows more than God's mercy. The prophet's visions also reveal God's anger. He was angry with Jerusalem. The cup of her stubborn immorality was full. Nothing would withhold the outpouring of His wrath. While individuals who repented could be forgiven and assured of God's mercy, the capture and destruction of Jerusalem was now inevitable. The Israelites as a nation had crossed the line. They had passed a point of no return.

#### **SEEING GOD**

- In God's use of silent drama, we see the creativity He may use to get our attention.
- In His warning of judgment, we see a God who has been "crushed" (6:9) by His people's adulteries.
- In the many times Ezekiel quoted God as saying, "Then you shall know that I am the LORD," we see God's deep desire for His people to know Him.

#### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- In Israel's unfaithfulness, we see our own stubborn determination to take control of our lives and to make gods that we can use for our own ends.
- In the need for Ezekiel's silent drama, we see our own resistance to spoken words.
- In the predicted judgment of Jerusalem, we see the seriousness of our sin.

## THE GOD WHO COULDN'T STAY

One of the wonders of the God of the Bible is that He loves to be near His people. We only need to read about Adam, Enoch, Noah, and David to see a God who wants to walk and talk with His people. He is the God who led Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and then through the wilderness for 40 years. He is the One who revealed His presence among His people through a brightness in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-38; Lev. 16:2) and temple (1 Ki. 8:10-13).

How then could God leave? What did they do that caused Him to turn out the “lights” in His temple and hand His “chosen” over to Babylonian invaders? The answers to these questions are part of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Fourteen months after the prophet’s initial call, while being consulted by a group of elders, he received a series of visions that told him why and how the glory would depart from Israel.

**Why God Left.** By way of a vision, the Lord took Ezekiel to the temple in Jerusalem. There the prophet saw the same glory he had seen in the vision of the wheels (8:3-4). But God showed Ezekiel more than the bright cloud of His presence. The Lord also showed him the extent of Israel’s hidden idolatry and how far His people had gone in bringing their idols into the house of the One who had said, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3).

At the north gate of the inner court of the temple, God showed Ezekiel what He called “the image of jealousy.” This was probably an image of the female goddess of fertility named Asherah.

In addition, the Lord showed Ezekiel 70 elders worshipping obscene cultic carvings (8:6-13), women weeping for the fertility god Tammuz in a pagan ritu-

al (8:14-15), and 25 men, probably priests, worshipping the sun (8:16).

From the beginning, God had told His people He was a jealous God who would not share His glory with another. Through Moses He said, “You shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex. 34:12-14). Isaiah would later quote the Lord as saying, “I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images” (Isa. 42:8).

Why, with warnings like these, would God’s chosen people fall back into idolatry? The Lord gave part of the answer to Ezekiel when He said, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols? For they say, ‘The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land’” (8:12).

From Israel’s point of view, God had forsaken them. From where they stood, it seemed He no longer cared enough to answer their prayers. They felt they could no longer depend on Him for protection. They thought they needed to find someone they could count on.

What they did not see was that by turning to other gods they were failing important tests of faith and love. By turning for help to the idols of their pagan neighbors, they were making it impossible for God to stay.

**How God Left.** God left reluctantly. Ezekiel saw the cloud slowly lift up from the holy of holies to the threshold of the temple. It stayed there until seven men had been sent out—one scribe to mark those who were true to God and six executioners to kill the rest. The cloud then slowly moved on out of the city, hovered briefly over the Mount of Olives, and then disappeared.

The Lord yearned to remain with His people, but their sin made it impossible. Through the prophet Hosea, He had issued the warning, “I will return again to My place till they acknowledge their offense. Then they will seek My face” (Hos. 5:15).

God is not finished with Israel. He will one day drive her to repentance and restore her. But except for the brief time Jesus lived on earth, God has withheld a visible sign of His presence among His people. Even Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, admitted the absence of this glory cloud in the two temples built after the exile (*The Jewish War*, Book 5, Ch.5).

The Israelites continue to be God’s covenant people (Lev. 26:44). But the signs of His presence will not be restored until the nation admits the many ways she has been unfaithful. Only when His people are broken by the awareness of their sins will the Lord delight to show His presence again.

This message of departure was not just to punish Jerusalem. When God removed His visible presence from His people, He was providing a national object lesson for the whole world. He wants people of all nations to know that He is a God who will not share His glory or His presence with another.

### SEEING GOD

- In God’s concern for the hearts of His people, we see the One who near the end of the New Testament still urged, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn. 5:21). An idol is anything that replaces the throne and glory of God in our hearts.
- In God’s jealousy, we see a God who has made us for Himself and who loves us enough to want us to enjoy Him forever.

## SEEING OURSELVES

- In Israel's reversion to idolatry, we see our own inclination to want a God who indulges our desires rather than One who requires our trust.
- In Israel's supposition that God had forsaken them, we see our own tendency to ignore the way we have forsaken Him.
- In Israel's turn to idolatry, we see our own tendency to turn to anything that will give us immediate relief and control in our troubled circumstances.

## THE LAND NOAH, DANIEL, AND JOB COULD NOT HAVE SAVED

Ezekiel wrote about false prophets who spoke lies in the name of God (13) instead of faithfully warning the people about their idolatry and uselessness (14–15). He described a land that had become so corrupt that “even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it,” they could not have stopped God's hand of judgment. Four times God repeated this amazing statement: Even if these three men of God had been living in the land, they could not have rescued this rebel nation. They could have delivered only themselves from God's hand of judgment (14:14,16,18,20).

Ezekiel reminded Jerusalem that in her youth she had been like a helpless, abandoned baby that God had found and raised for Himself (16:1-14). Under His care she had become well-known and sought-after because of her beauty and wealth.

Yet even though God had given Jerusalem everything she had, Ezekiel had to say, “But you trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who would have it” (16:15).

In God's eyes, His people had become a shameless prostitute. They were so corrupt that they made the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah look good by comparison. Speaking to a people familiar with the history of Sodom, Ezekiel wrote:

*“Your younger sister, who dwells to the south of you, is Sodom . . . . You did not walk in their ways nor act according to their abominations; but, as if that were too little, you became more corrupt than they in all your ways. As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “neither your sister Sodom nor her daughters have done as you and your daughters have done. Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit” (16:46-50).*

As the moral condition of the people went from bad to worse, they got little help from those who should have been looking after their spiritual interests. False prophets promised peace when there was no peace. Then Zedekiah, king of Jerusalem, broke a national agreement with Nebuchadnezzar (17) by going down to Egypt looking for help. Instead of admitting that Israel's problems were rooted in her idolatry, and that help could be found only by repenting before the Lord, Zedekiah went to the king of Egypt and aroused not only the anger of Babylon, but the anger of the Lord Himself (vv.11-21). The people of God were digging their own grave deeper and deeper.

## THE EXCUSE THAT WOULDN'T WORK

According to Ezekiel, the people of Israel had been making excuses for their behavior. They had been quoting a proverb that said, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (18:2). This saying implied that they were suffering for the sins of their ancestors. While they were right in seeing that they had been influenced by the sins of their fathers, they were wrong in thinking that God was holding them responsible for their parents’ choices.

Ezekiel reminded them that God holds fathers and children responsible for their own sins. Both can find forgiveness through repentance, just as both can bring trouble on themselves by refusing to respond to the corrective hand of God.

This emphasis on individual responsibility does not contradict Exodus 20:4, which says that God punishes the children for the sins of the fathers “to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.” The Exodus statement assumes the statistical norm that as a rule, descendants of godless people continue to be as their fathers were before them. What Ezekiel added was the other side of the coin. We are all accountable for the way we respond to the influence of our fathers. God sees, as no one else can, the responsibility of personal choice that He has given us.

In emphasizing our personal responsibility, Ezekiel made statements some have found disturbing. He seemed to say that “salvation” can be lost. Over and over he emphasized that all of the good a righteous man has done will be forgotten if he starts to sin, just as all of the wicked things a godless man has done will be forgotten if he turns away from his sin and begins to do what is right.

These statements by Ezekiel, however, were describing the physical pains of Israel (“children’s teeth on edge”) while he was predicting the looming physical destruction of Jerusalem. He was warning about the physical consequences of spiritual choices. The focus was on the land, not on heaven.

Physical death or loss of health as a result of willful disobedience is taught clearly not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament. Paul declared that because of taking the Lord’s Supper in “an unworthy manner” many were “weak and sick” and many had died (1 Cor. 11:29-30).

While death is “gain” (Phil. 1:21) for the Lord’s people, dying under His corrective hand has in it an element of tragedy. A premature death ends our opportunity for service in this needy world. It takes us away from loved ones we could have helped. A person of faith who dies this way will undoubtedly be welcomed into heaven, but likely will not hear the Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt. 25:21). Moreover, at the judgment seat of Christ this person will have a smaller reward than if he had lived out his allotted time in faithful service.

God reveals His heart in the book of Ezekiel. Even while loving us enough to warn us about the possibilities of loss, He assures us that His judgment will be in love, for He says, “I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies” (18:32).

### **SEEING GOD**

- In God’s tenderness to Israel, we see the kind of mercy that He has offered us in Christ.
- In God’s description of Israel’s prostitution, we see a God who defines sin in terms of faithfulness or unfaithfulness to Himself.

- In God's emphasis on personal responsibility, we see One who defines where external influences end and our own personal choices begin.
- In God's statement that He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, we see a God who cares for us even though we sin.

### SEEING OURSELVES

- In God's statement that Israel had become more wicked than Sodom, we are reminded of our own capacity for evil.
- In God's recounting of the sins of Sodom, we see our own tendency to live only for our own pleasure.
- In Israel's use of the sour-grapes proverb, we see our inclination to excuse our own behavior.
- In God's appeal to Israel, we see the fork in our own road that leads to life or to death.

### THE DAY EZEKIEL'S WIFE DIED

Almost a year after his first vision, Ezekiel received a visit from Jewish elders who asked him for a word from God (20:1). At that meeting the Lord had enabled Ezekiel to speak. But the words were severe. The prophet had to tell them that in God's eyes they were living as stubborn rebels and spiritual adulterers destined for severe punishment (20–23).

Seven years later, another day dawned that Ezekiel would never forget. It was January 15, 588 BC—the day Nebuchadnezzar began his final siege of Jerusalem. It was also the day Ezekiel's wife died. In the morning, God had told the prophet He was going to take from him “the desire of his eyes.” He also told Ezekiel not to mourn in the customary manner.

The text recording Ezekiel's loss is disturbingly stark. He simply wrote:

*So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died; and the next morning I did as I was commanded. And the people said to me, "Will you not tell us what these things signify to us, that you behave so?" (24:18-19).*

As the news spread, people came to share Ezekiel's grief, only to discover that the prophet was not mourning. They could hardly help but listen when he told them that his silent grief was a token of the stunned disbelief and pain they would feel when enemy armies destroyed Jerusalem, profaned the temple, and slaughtered their relatives who were still living there. The news would hurt them so deeply that they would, like Ezekiel, forgo the mourning ritual.

**The Judgment Of Seven Enemies.** As Nebuchadnezzar began his siege of Jerusalem, Ezekiel began to prophesy against Gentile nations who down through history have tried to take advantage of Israel's desolations. These prophecies show not only that the Lord can use godless governments to bring His people back to their senses, but that no nation should ever be proud of being given an upper hand over the nation of Israel.

In chapters 25–32 of Ezekiel, God promised to punish Israel's neighbors Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt to the degree that they had abused His people (25:3-4,8-9,12-13,15-16; 26:2-3; 28:24; 29:6-9) and to the extent that they themselves were ripe for judgment.

**The Amazing Prophecy Against Tyre.** Tyre's destruction is described in vivid detail, and history records its fulfillment. As a prosperous maritime city-state of Phoenicia, Tyre was divided into two parts—

a large, spreading metropolis on the Mediterranean coast, and an island settlement about a half mile from shore. Ezekiel depicted the judgment as taking place in stages. First the coastal city of Tyre would be attacked by nation after nation, until flattened by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar (26:1-11). Then another enemy, referred to simply as “they,” would “lay your stones, your timber, and your soil in the midst of the water” (26:12).

This second part of the prophecy was fulfilled in detail when the forces of Alexander the Great conquered the island city. Alexander’s manpower scraped the ruins of coastal Tyre into the sea and used the debris to build a causeway to the island. With the land bridge established, Tyre was easily taken. From that time on, Tyre never returned to her former glory as the commercial center of the world. It happened just as Ezekiel had prophesied!

In the prophecy against Tyre, there is another important dimension. In Ezekiel’s pronouncements against the king of Tyre, the prophet saw a link between the pride of Tyre and the pride of Satan himself. Ezekiel used the link to give us some important information about the history of our spiritual enemy.

Ezekiel called the king of Tyre the “anointed cherub who covers” and said of him, “You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways . . . till iniquity was found in you” (28:14-15). Even if we acknowledge poetic license, we must see more here than reference to an earthly king. These words undoubtedly portray Satan, the invisible spiritual being whose character was seen in the pride of the king of Tyre (also Isa. 14:3-21).

## SEEING GOD

- In the death of Ezekiel's wife, we see a God who gives and takes away.
- In the Lord's use of Ezekiel's loss, we see a God who understands our pleasures and our pain.
- In God's judgment on seven of Israel's enemies, we see One who is angered when we delight in or take advantage of the hardship of others.
- In the destruction of Tyre, we see the power of God to fulfill predictions that seem unlikely.

## SEEING OURSELVES

- In the death of Ezekiel's wife, we see our own pain and vulnerability to loss.
- In the prophet's lack of mourning, we see our own pain that is sometimes too intense for us to express.
- In Israel's predicament, we see our own tendency to disbelieve what God is saying and to reject God's love until we find ourselves in circumstances that are too awful for us to believe.
- In the satanic character of the king of Tyre, we see how we at times can reflect the proud and self-absorbed character of God's spiritual enemy.
- In the enemies of Israel, we see our own tendency to take advantage of the weaknesses and misfortunes of others.

## THE SELF-CENTERED SHEPHERDS OF ISRAEL

Ezekiel 34 begins with a stinging indictment of those shepherds of Israel who failed to feed their people. Rather than confronting Jerusalem with the seriousness of her sin, some of the shepherds embittered the people by their harshness and self-centeredness (34:4). Other shepherds merely told the people what they wanted to hear. They had been promising peace

when war loomed, and deliverance when the people were ripe for judgment. So Ezekiel declared:

*The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them" ' ' " (34:1-6).*

Many would lose homes, land, children, friends, and lives while the shepherds of Israel remained pre-occupied with their own comforts. Generations of Israel were about to die without hope, yet the guards and watchmen of Israel "slept" on their watch.

By the time Ezekiel began to call people back to their God, their hearts were so desensitized by false prophets and their own sin that they would listen to Ezekiel the way one listens to a skilled musician. They would actually enjoy listening to his words, but they would not do anything to change (33:30-33).

## THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

God would not cast off Israel forever. She was His nation. She bore His name, not just for herself but as a light to the nations. In time, God, for His own name's sake, for the good of the nations, and for the joy of a faithful remnant, would fulfill His promise to bring them back to their land. He would be the Good Shepherd of His scattered sheep.

This future restoration of Israel is the theme of Ezekiel 34. Beginning with the messages recorded in chapter 33 (spoken about the time of the Babylonian entry into Jerusalem), the remainder of the book focuses on Israel's future repentance and restoration.

In his beautiful "oracle to the mountains of Israel" (36:1-38), Ezekiel declared that God will not permit the nations that despised Israel when she was captured to retain the territory they captured (vv.1-15). Even though He allowed Jerusalem to be broken and scattered for her sin, He will one day "sanctify" His great name through her. As an all-powerful Shepherd, He promised:

*Say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,' says the Lord GOD, 'when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all*

*your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God' ” (36:22-28).*

The future restoration of Israel is assured not because Israel deserves mercy. The honor of God's name is at stake! He made promises to her which He must fulfill to be true to Himself.

**The Valley Of Dry Bones (37:1-14).** In one of the most well-known visions of Ezekiel, God showed the prophet a valley of bones and commanded him to prophesy to them. Ezekiel obeyed, and as he did, the bones came together with sinews, muscles, and skin to form lifeless bodies. When at God's command he prophesied to them again, they received breath and stood up as “an exceedingly great army” (v.10).

The scattered bones symbolize the Jewish exiles in their seemingly hopeless state. The coming together of a lifeless body pictures the regathering of a nation prior to spiritual conversion—a condition true of the modern nation of Israel since its establishment by the United Nations in 1948. When God finally brings Israel “out of their graves” and establishes them in the kingdom of their Messiah, all the world will know that the God of Israel deserves worship, trust, love, and obedience.

**The Two Sticks (37:15-28).** The context makes it clear that the two sticks described in these verses predict the future uniting of the northern and southern

kingdoms of Israel in their own land under a king of David's line.

These two sticks may indicate that the modern state of Israel will once again be divided before being united under the leadership of their Messiah. Or the two sticks "made one" might refer to a final healing of a people fractured since the division of the land in 940 BC. In any case, the people will once again be united under the God of Israel. Ezekiel declared:

*Thus says the Lord GOD: "Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. . . . Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them. . . . I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore" (vv.21-24,27-28).*

#### **SEEING GOD**

- In Israel's Shepherd, we see the God who cares enough to come to our rescue.
- In the valley of the dry bones, we see how God leads us to Himself even before we cry out for spiritual life.
- In God's steadfast faithfulness to Israel, we see One who can be counted on to keep His promises.

## SEEING OURSELVES

- In the failure of Israel's shepherds, we can see our tendency to be concerned primarily with our own interests.
- In Israel's fractured and scattered condition, we see our own need for the Good Shepherd.
- In Israel's history, we see our own condition of not deserving the help we desperately need.

## THE WAR GOD WILL FIGHT FOR ISRAEL

Chapters 38 and 39 describe a confederacy of nations from the north. They come down to attack unsuspecting Israel before being destroyed by God's supernatural intervention. Various details in the account and varying views about the way to interpret prophecy, however, have given rise to much controversy about these chapters. Since this is an overview of the whole book, we will focus on the text itself and present several plausible interpretations that have been offered by capable Bible-believing scholars.

**The Setting**—in the “latter years” when Israel is in the land and is living “safely” (38:8).

**The Invaders**—Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Cush, Put, Gomer, Togarmah, Sheba, Dedan, and Tarshish. These names appear in Genesis 10:2-7, but their specific relationship with modern nations is disputed. So is the idea that the word *chief* in verse 3 should be rendered “Rosh.” And making it refer to modern Russia because of the similarity in sound is arguable. Dr. Ralph H. Alexander, after acknowledging the elements of uncertainty, writes, “It can be concluded that Gog is a person from the region of Magog . . . the prince . . . over the geographical areas, or countries, Meshech and Tubal. These land areas or countries

appear to be located generally toward the south of the Black and Caspian Seas in the modern countries of Turkey, Russia, and Iran.” The other names represent the allies of Gog when he makes his attack.

**The Battle**—The invading forces and the Israelites seem never to contact each other. A tremendous earthquake will throw the enemy soldiers into such panic that they will start killing one another. The Lord will pour down diseases that bring instant death, plus bloodshed, rain, hailstones, and burning sulphur (38:17-23). The armies are destroyed “on the mountains of Israel.” Moreover, fire falls on the territory of Magog—on people far from the battlefield (39:3-6). God’s supernatural involvement will be so obvious that the survivors will acknowledge His power (38:23; 39:7,21).

**The Aftermath**—The weapons left in the fields will provide fuel for the Israelites that will last 7 years. (Ezekiel depicted weapons with which he and his contemporaries were familiar. It is likely that they will be modern weaponry with today’s fuel.) The dead bodies of the slain will provide food for hordes of scavengers—beasts and birds (39:17-20). Even so, the smell of decay will be oppressive (39:11), and the people will be occupied with burying the bones for more than 7 months (39:12-15). This devastation will be followed by millennial blessings (39:25-29).

**The Eschatological Time**—Four views are held by biblical scholars:

**VIEW 1:** Near the midpoint of Daniel’s 70th week. Israel will be enjoying security because of the protection afforded by the world ruler before he shows himself to be the Antichrist. But then he demands that he be worshiped, killing all who refuse. (See Dan. 9:24-

27; Rev. 13:1-18.) In this view, the Israelites are attacked unexpectedly (as required by 38:8), but the period that follows—the great tribulation described in Revelation—will be so horrendous that it is difficult to envision people clearing the battlefield of war equipment and dead bodies as depicted in 39:9-20.

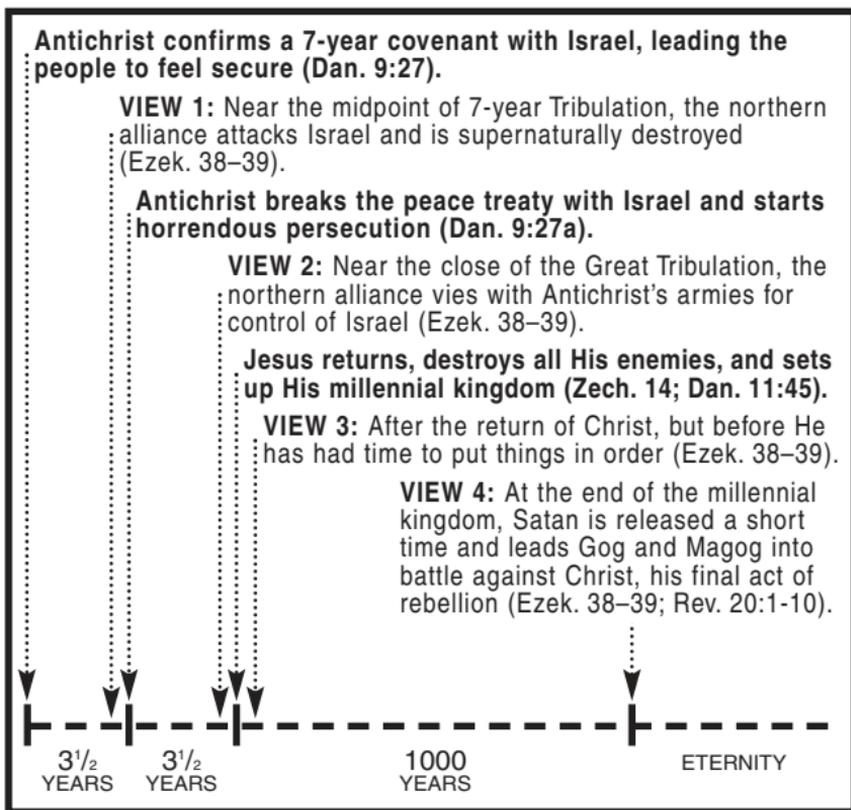
**VIEW 2:** Near the close of Daniel's 70th week as part of the war of Armageddon described in Daniel 11:36-45; Zechariah 12,14; Revelation 14:14-20; 16:17-21; 19:11-21. Various excellent scholars take this position and manage in different ways to integrate the Scriptures listed above. But reading Ezekiel 38 and 39 gives the impression of an invading force that is destroyed before it meets enemy armies.

**VIEW 3:** During the transition period between the destruction of the armies gathered at Megiddo at Christ's return, and His subjugation of the northern confederacy. In this scenario, the Beast and False Prophet are still free for a brief time after the great battle of Armageddon as depicted in Revelation 16:16-21 and 19:11-16. In this view, Revelation 19:17-21 does not refer to Armageddon, but to the battle depicted in Ezekiel 38 and 39. The regathered and converted Israelites are living safely because Messiah has returned. This position is strengthened by the fact that the "great supper" is common to both Ezekiel 39:17-20 and Revelation 19:17-19. Additionally, the time spent cleaning up the battlefield coincides nicely with the idea of a transitional period of preparation as the kingdom age begins.

**VIEW 4:** At the close of the millennial kingdom, when Satan is released for a little while, gathers a following, and then makes one final and futile assault against God. In favor of this view are the facts that the

Israelites will be living safely and that the words “Gog and Magog” appear in Revelation 20:7-10 as in Ezekiel 38:1-2 and 39:1-2. But one wonders why the Lord would have people spend so much time cleaning up the land when He is on the verge of purifying the whole planet by fire and bringing down the new heavens and earth as depicted in 2 Peter 3:10-13 and Revelation 20:11–21:27.

Most Bible students who are committed to the principle of literal interpretation will choose one of these four options.



### Four Views Of The Time Of Ezekiel 38–39

## THE DAY OF GOD'S RETURN

In 592 BC, Ezekiel had a vision in which he saw the glory cloud, the symbol of God's special presence, leave Jerusalem. Nineteen years later, in 573 BC, he had a vision in which he saw the Lord visibly return. Related to this return, he saw a new temple and tremendous topographical changes in the land.

**The New Temple.** The temple Ezekiel saw was quite different from the one built by Solomon. The prophet recorded its precise measurements (40–41), delineated the buildings associated with it (42), described the entrance of the glory cloud (43:1-12), depicted the great golden altar and the ceremony of cleansing by which it was dedicated (43:13-27), and stated God's regulations and ordinances for life and worship (44:4–46:24).

The sacrifices of this future temple will not be a return to the Mosaic ritual that foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice. Just as the Lord's Supper now commemorates His once-for-all sacrifice, so the temple sacrifices of the millennium will be reminders of what Jesus Christ did for us there. Those who object to the killing of animals in the millennium must remember that this is an earthly kingdom, not heaven.

**The New Land.** While the boundaries of the land will be similar to those of ancient Israel, it will be greatly changed. A river will flow out of the temple in ever-increasing volume toward the Dead Sea. It will be clear and filled with many varieties of fish—a fisherman's paradise. It will bring life and healing wherever it goes, even to the Dead Sea (47:1-12).

**The New City.** The new city will be square and have three gates on each side. In some respects, it

will foreshadow the Holy City of Revelation 21. But it will have a temple (as noted earlier), while the eternal city will not need one, “for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22). However, because Jesus Christ is King and the glory cloud resides in the temple, the name of Jerusalem will be, “THE LORD IS THERE” (Ezek. 48:35).

#### **SEEING GOD**

- The predicted invasion from the north shows a God who sees our problems long before we do.
- The power God uses to overwhelm and consume the coalition of invading armies shows the kind of power He can call on to defeat our enemies.
- The difficulty of knowing exactly when this battle will take place reminds us of our need to trust the only One who understands the times and seasons of our lives.

#### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- The coalition’s hatred of Israel reminds us of how much our spiritual enemy hates us.
- The Lord’s promise to occupy a future temple reminds us of our present privilege of being temples of the Holy Spirit.

# GOD WITH US

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The prophecy of Ezekiel begins with God displaying His power to a despondent young prophet living as a displaced person a long way from home. It closes 21 years later with this same prophet celebrating a glorious age when the presence of the Lord will ensure worldwide righteousness, justice, peace, and prosperity. This is how God often works—tears before joy, the cross before the empty tomb.

The good news is that the God who gave Ezekiel a glimpse of His glory can do the same for us. He may not give us a vision, but He can make His power and presence real to us. The Lord Jesus, who came to reveal the Father, to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, and to conquer death for us through His resurrection, promised, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). He is with us. And He will show Himself to us if we make obeying Him our highest priority. On the night before His crucifixion He said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love Him and manifest Myself to him” (Jn. 14:21).

The truth and power we see in Christ is the same truth and power that can be seen in the world around us. The God who captured Ezekiel’s attention with a cloud of fire and wheels within wheels is the same God who in our day can use hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes, fire, and famine to remind us of His power. He is the same Lord of the nations who may now be setting the stage for the return of His Son and the complete fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecies.

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