

Ezekiel's Sign

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 1:2–6

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 1:1–3; 2:1–3:27; 8:1–4;
11:22–25; 24:15–24; 33:30–33

Ezekiel 3:10–11

¹⁰ And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. ¹¹ Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.”

Ezekiel 24:15–24, 27

¹⁵ The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ “Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. ¹⁷ Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners.”

¹⁸ So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

¹⁹ Then the people asked me, “Won’t you tell us what these things have to do with us? Why are you acting like this?”

²⁰ So I said to them, “The word of the LORD came to me: ²¹ Say to the people of Israel, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary—the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword. ²² And you will do as I have done. You will not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners. ²³ You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves. ²⁴ Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.’ ”

²⁷ “At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the LORD.”

Key Text

He said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you.”

—Jeremiah 3:10

Introduction

A. Shaken to Our Senses

John Newton (1725–1807), author of the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace,” had a dishonorable past. Infamous among his misdeeds was his involvement in the slave trade. Even prior to this, he lived far from what would be considered a moral life. At age 11, he lost his mother and was sent off to sea to live with his father. There he soon succumbed to sinful behavior and immoral habits.

After several years as a mariner, he encountered a life-threatening storm. Biographies point to this experience as marking the start of his journey to a committed life of faith. The fear and pain of the near-death experience caused him to struggle with who and what he had become. The result was a conversion experience that marked a shift in the direction of his life and his view of God. Newton repented of his role in the slave trade and joined England’s abolition movement.

Sometimes it takes pain and suffering to bring an awareness of our sin. At times, God chooses to allow such circumstances to awaken his people and remind us of who he is and who we are not: God.

B. Lesson Context: Ezekiel, the Man

The prophet Ezekiel was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. Both lived at the time of the Babylonian captivity in the mid-sixth century BC. Ezekiel was 30 years old in “the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin,” which was the year 592 BC (Ezekiel 1:1–2; compare 2 Kings 24:8–15).

The Babylonian captivity occurred in three stages: the deportations of 605, 597, and 586 BC (2 Kings 24–25; 2 Chronicles 36). Ezekiel’s involuntary relocation to Babylon was a part of the second stage of exile in 597 BC. He was among the 10,000 of the elite citizenry taken at that time (2 Kings 24:12–14). Daniel and other Jews who had been deported in the first stage ended up serving “in the king’s palace” (Daniel 1:4). While Ezekiel, coming in the second stage, found himself in a completely different setting. He was “among the exiles by the Kebar River” in Babylon (Ezekiel 1:1).

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 3: Ezekiel and the Exile of Judah

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the status of the inhabitants of Judah in general and Ezekiel in particular.
2. Explain the role of a prophet as a “visual aid” that God uses to communicate difficult truths.
3. Suggest ways that Christians can become a “visual aid” to proclaim the gospel of Jesus.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Shaken to Our Senses
- B. Lesson Context: Ezekiel, the Man
- C. Lesson Context: Ezekiel, the Book

I. Two Imperatives (Ezekiel 3:10–11)

- A. Listen Carefully (v. 10)
Believing in What You “Sell”
- B. Speak Carefully (v. 11)

II. Unusual Reaction (Ezekiel 24:15–18)

- A. God’s Command (vv. 15–17)
- B. Ezekiel’s Obedience (v. 18)

III. Sobering Prophecy (Ezekiel 24:19–24, 27)

- A. People’s Inquiry (v. 19)
- B. Jerusalem’s Fate (vv. 20–23)
- C. Ezekiel’s Role (vv. 24, 27)
Glowing in the Dark

Conclusion

- A. Delivering a Hard Word
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Ezekiel is introduced as “the priest” (Ezekiel 1:3). And that is what he would have remained had it not been for the divine wrath that was to be visited on the southern kingdom of Judah at the time. His call to be a prophet is described in Ezekiel 2, which is not part of today’s study.

C. Lesson Context: Ezekiel, the Book

The book of Ezekiel is commonly and most simply outlined in terms of three sections:

- I. Judgment on the covenant people (chapters 1–24)
- II. Judgment on foreign nations (chapters 25–32)
- III. New hope for God’s people (chapters 33–48)

Today’s study occurs in the first of these three sections.

One important feature of this book is its many references to exact dates. These are found in Ezekiel 1:1–3; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1. Most of these dating formulas introduce a communication from God to the prophet. One example relates news of the fall of Jerusalem from a man who had escaped that carnage (Ezekiel 33:21; compare 4:16–17; 5:10–12). Today’s study concerns God’s communication before that event happens.

I. Two Imperatives
(Ezekiel 3:10–11)

A. Listen Carefully (v. 10)

10a. And he said to me, “Son of man,

This verse and the next offer us just a small part of Ezekiel’s commissioning to be a prophet of God. That lengthy commissioning is described in all of chapters 2 and 3! The idea is that the man Ezekiel must be prepared for his new role.

If we are familiar with the phrase *Son of man* as a self-designation of Jesus, we may be surprised to see it used here to refer to Ezekiel. In fact, of the nearly 200 occurrences of this phrase in the Bible, close to half are found in the book of Ezekiel. Its use here may be to stress Ezekiel’s mortality. It is in that light that the prophet is to measure himself against God.

10b. “listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you.

In Ezekiel 2:8–3:3, the prophet-in-training was commanded to eat a message “contained on a scroll” and to fill his “belly” and “stomach” with its words. When we place that command alongside the instruction here for Ezekiel to *take to heart* what he hears that God has to say, the picture is one of complete and total acceptance of the Lord’s message (contrast the people’s response in Isaiah 6:9–10).

Believing in What You “Sell”

When I see celebrities or social-media influencers endorse various products, I always wonder if they really believe in and use the products themselves. Are those spokespersons true believers, or are they just taking a paid gig?

The Bible has a lot to say about beliefs and practices that spring from both self-centered and God-centered motives (1 Samuel 12:3–4; Acts 8:18–19; 16:16–21; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:1–2; etc.). The cure for wrong motives is to be so thoroughly permeated with the Word of God that there is no room for them.

Here’s a challenge in that regard: read the Bible cover to cover, word for word every year for at least 10 years. Having done just that myself, I’m always alert to the danger of substituting my word for God’s. Will you take the challenge? —R. L. N.

B. Speak Carefully (v. 11)

11. “Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.”

To this point in the book, the Lord has spoken of the audience Ezekiel will be addressing as “obstinate,” “stubborn,” and “hardened” (Ezekiel 2:4; 3:7). As such, they are “briers,” “thorns,” and “scorpions” (2:6). Ezekiel won’t have to travel far to address them because he lives right among them *in exile* (see Lesson Context: Ezekiel, the Man).

In sharing in the fate of the people, it will be natural for Ezekiel to speak with compassion. But Ezekiel’s compassion must not be allowed to soften the Lord’s message. *Whether they listen or fail to listen* is irrelevant in that regard (compare Ezekiel 2:5, 7). The prophet’s duty is to remain faithful to the

Lord’s message. His listeners must decide for themselves whether they will do the same.

What Do You Think?

Why do you think God told Ezekiel to speak his word whether the people listened or not?

Digging Deeper

When might God call you to speak, whether or not it seems likely people will receive it?

II. Unusual Reaction

(Ezekiel 24:15–18)

A. God’s Command (vv. 15–17)

15–16a. The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes.

The prophet has obeyed God without fail in communicating *the word of the Lord* to the people. Much of this communication has involved him using himself in and as illustrations of God’s wrath to come against the covenant people (Ezekiel 4:1–13; 5:1–12; etc.). Another illustration is coming: the loss of *the delight of the prophet’s eyes*, the death of Ezekiel’s wife. What this death is designed to illustrate is revealed in Ezekiel 24:21, below.

16b–17. “Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners.”

In a series of nine commands, God directs that Ezekiel’s outward, visible and audible reaction to his loss is to be strictly countercultural. Mourning the death of another can involve lengthy and demonstrative behavior in various cultures, both ancient and modern (compare Genesis 37:34–35; 50:1–14). The funeral and accompanying days of mourning would involve all friends and family who could attend. Musicians might be hired to sing laments or play instruments (Matthew 9:23–24, etc.). The volume of sound would be quite high (Mark 5:38, etc.).

The phrases *keep . . . your sandals on your feet; do not cover your mustache and beard* indicate a shared expectation regarding proper “mourning attire” (compare 2 Samuel 14:2; Jeremiah 6:26). Similarly, the phrase *eat the customary food of mourners* points to food that is eaten at funeral meals (compare 16:7).

There is a certain overlap in the meanings of these nine prohibitions, and it’s tempting to examine each of the nine in minute detail. It’s more valuable, however, to focus on the bigger picture: the larger task of prophetic communication must take precedence over all else.

What Do You Think?

When has God asked you to go through something difficult, such as the loss of a loved one?

Digging Deeper

Has God used difficult events in your life to speak to someone else?

B. Ezekiel’s Obedience (v. 18)

18. So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

Ezekiel obeys God—period. Even so, we can’t help but notice that the text is striking for what it does not say and the obvious questions it does not answer. The timeline of *in the morning, and in the evening . . . [and] the next morning* indicates a period of many hours between Ezekiel’s receiving God’s instruction, the death of the prophet’s wife, and the man’s divinely commanded visible non-reaction to it. What did Ezekiel do during the hours between those three events? Did he tell his wife about her pending death? Did he pray to God that death would not happen? Had his wife been at the point of death anyway due to illness? The text simply does not say.

III. Sobering Prophecy

(Ezekiel 24:19–24, 27)

A. People’s Inquiry (v. 19)

19. Then the people asked me, “Won’t you

tell us what these things have to do with us?
Why are you acting like this?"

The people notice Ezekiel's odd behavior. He exhibits none of the typical actions, emotions, or postures of grief. Interested curiosity is a good first step toward understanding something. But as we move from curiosity to investigation to understanding, we must be aware of what we use as a "filter" in reaching conclusions. Another way to say this is that we must acknowledge our presuppositions. Then we must be prepared to change them as the evidence requires.

This challenge repeats itself throughout the book of Ezekiel as God labors to change the mindset of his people. That mindset is one of rebellion against God, a fact stressed about a dozen times in this book (Ezekiel 12:2–3, etc.). God's repeated technique is to catch people's attention through certain actions or inactions of his prophet (compare 12:9; 17:12). If the explanation for those behaviors doesn't match what the people expect to hear (that is, it doesn't line up with their presuppositions), then the explanation is rejected or twisted in some way (compare 20:49).

B. Jerusalem's Fate (vv. 20–23)
20. So I said to them, "The word of the LORD came to me:

The author's frequent use of the words *I* and *me* leaves no doubt that Ezekiel himself was writing of his personal experiences regarding his interactions with God. As the prophet passes along divine communication, he is fulfilling his role as a watchman (Ezekiel 3:16–27; 33:1–20). The phrase *the word of the Lord* makes clear that what the prophet is about to say does not originate with himself.

The numerous uses of this introductory formula in the Bible usually don't specify exactly how the communication occurred. Those cases where that "how" is specified include communication by dreams or visions (1 Kings 3:5; Daniel 2:19; etc.), through an angel (Judges 6:12, etc.), and from a burning bush (Exodus 3). But the method is not important here. What's important is that the prophecy proves to be true.

21a. "Say to the people of Israel,

People are more open to learning something new if they themselves open the discussion. That seems to be the technique here as Ezekiel has waited for the people to ask, "Why?" before he gives the answer that begins in this verse.

The response *the people of Israel* invites a review of the terminology used to identify God's covenant people of the Old Testament era. Shortly after the death of King Solomon in 930 BC, the united kingdom of Israel's 12 tribes divided into two kingdoms (1 Kings 11:41–12:20). After that happened, the word *Israel* often became associated with only the 10 northernmost tribes (1 Kings 12:21, etc.). Even so, that distinction had also been used before the monarchy divided (2 Samuel 19:41–43, etc.). Concurrently, the designation *Judah* often was shorthand for the 2 southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin (Jeremiah 6:1; compare Ezra 4:1 with Ezra 4:4). The tribe of Benjamin was much smaller than that of Judah (Numbers 1:20–46; 26:1–51; Judges 20–21; 1 Samuel 9:21).

But that distinction in sense and reference was not always airtight after the monarchy divided. In the text before us, for example, the word *Israel* does not seem to include the 10 northern tribes since the audience is those of Judah (and Benjamin) who were in Babylonian exile; the 10 northernmost tribes had been taken into Assyrian exile over 130 years prior (2 Kings 18:9–12). That conclusion harmonizes with the way the writer refers to Israelites in Ezekiel 2:3; 3:7; 6:5; etc. (compare Ezekiel 9:9).

We also should investigate differing ways the covenant people are identified as we consider the first part of the phrase *the people of Israel*. The Hebrew translated *people* describes the people group as a single family. But the Old Testament describes the Israelites in several other ways as well: as "sons of Israel," "people of Israel," etc. In

How to Say It

Assyrians	Uh-sear-e-unz.
Babylonians	Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.
Kebar	Kee-bawr.
Pharaoh	Fair-o or Fay-roe.

How will you proclaim God's truth?



Visual for Lesson 11. *Point to this visual as you conclude the lesson and consider the question in this visual as a class.*

referring to the residents of Judah, Ezekiel prefers to use some form of the word *Israel* rather than *Judah* by a ratio of nearly 11 to 1.

21b. “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary—the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword.

This is the answer to the “Why?” question of Ezekiel 24:19, above. The prophet’s audience is expected to see that his reaction (or, more precisely, his lack of reaction) to the death of his wife as an analogy:

- I. Loss of Ezekiel’s wife = loss of temple (*the delight of your eyes*);
- II. Ezekiel = the people;
- III. Ezekiel’s reaction = people’s reaction to the destruction and death.

As the Assyrians were God’s tool to exile Israel’s 10 northern tribes in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:3–6; Isaiah 7:18–25), so also the Babylonians would be to the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC (Ezekiel 24:1–2; 33:21). The temple is not some kind of good-luck charm that protects evil people (Jeremiah 7:1–4; see also Lesson 6).

Although Ezekiel’s audience in Babylon would not personally experience the destruction to be wrought by Nebuchadnezzar, they would share in the horror of that event nonetheless. They would experience the dismay expressed in texts such as

Psalms 79, 137, or Lamentations 2. This would be the punishment for their sin of idolatry.

22–23. “ ‘And you will do as I have done. You will not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners. You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves.

The prophet now drives home the analogy. No one can miss the “this will be like that” connections between his reactions (and lack of reactions) to his wife’s death and those that will characterize the people when they hear of Jerusalem’s fall. As Ezekiel speaks, it is January 15, 588 BC (Ezekiel 24:1); Jerusalem would fall on July 18, 586 BC. Thus Jerusalem has only a bit longer than two and a half years before it will be destroyed.

We may wonder how a city could survive a siege that lasts more than 30 months. The answer is found in Jeremiah 37:11—the siege was lifted temporarily while the Babylonian army dealt with a threat regarding Pharaoh’s army.

What Do You Think?

What do you think it was like for the Israelites, being unable to mourn openly for the loss of their loved ones and their city?

Digging Deeper

What does mourning communicate about the people we have lost?

C. Ezekiel’s Role (vv. 24, 27)

24. “ ‘Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD’ ”

We dare not miss the point here! False prophets and their false prophecies are rampant in this era (Ezekiel 13:1–7; 22:28). Their messages contradict those of the true prophets of God. So, how are the people to know who is a true prophet and who is a false prophet? The obvious answer is to wait and see whose prophecies come true. It is in that sense that the prophet *Ezekiel* will be a *sign* (compare 4:3; 12:6, 11; and 24:27, below).

What Do You Think?

What do you think God wanted the Israelites to realize through the prophecy?

Digging Deeper

In what ways do you struggle to recognize that God is in control and the one that we should go to for help?

Glowing in the Dark

My children have always loved glow sticks—the kind you can find at dollar stores. Glow sticks are meant to be enjoyed in the dark. And for them to work at all, they have to be broken. It can seem counterintuitive to break a brand-new item. But that’s what makes glow sticks work. Without breaking them, they cannot glow.

For a person to come to (or return to) God requires a certain “breaking” of one’s spirit or attitude (Psalms 34:18; 51:17; Isaiah 57:15; 66:2; etc.). It’s only when we’re broken that we realize our need for him (compare Luke 18:9–14). Our glow can serve to light the world best when we’re in our darkest hour. The prophet Ezekiel is a prime example still today. In his darkest times, Ezekiel was a shining light for the Lord.

Everyone is broken at some time and in some way. The resulting darkness can be lonely and frightening. But it is at such times that our character can shine brightest. Consider the differing outlooks in Job 2:9 and Matthew 5:14–16. Which will you pick when disaster strikes? —B. R.

27. “At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the LORD.”

This verse signals a shift away from God’s address to the people (through Ezekiel) and toward the prophet himself. The time frame signified by *at that time* is the time of Jerusalem’s predicted fall.

A feature of Ezekiel’s being *a sign* is that he was to react to his grief by not reacting to it per Ezekiel 24:16b–17, above. That reaction was to include silence. This verse reverses that, as the prophet’s

mouth is to *be opened* and he is allowed to *speak and no longer be silent* (compare Ezekiel 3:26–27). The phrase *with him* refers to a man in Ezekiel 33:21–22; that passage also lifts the prophet’s silence.

What Do You Think?

How do you think the people felt when events occurred just as Ezekiel and other prophets had said?

Digging Deeper

How can we take care to listen to what God has to say to us?

Conclusion

A. Delivering a Hard Word

The prophets often brought words of warning or imminent destruction and pain due to the people’s lack of faithfulness to God. We see this time and time again in Scripture. The prophets were also responsible for bringing the word of God to people, whether they listened or not. Both the messages and the messengers were often rejected (Luke 11:47–51). God even predicted that such things would happen (Jeremiah 7:27; Ezekiel 3:7).

It’s probably safe to say that few, if any, of us will be asked to do something quite like Ezekiel was required to do. Even so, we all face times when speaking difficult truths to people is uncomfortable. Although the gospel is good news, it is also a stumbling block. As it tells us that we can have forgiveness in Christ, it also tells us we are sinners in need of a Savior. To speak this is our task.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we struggle to pay attention during times of crisis because we do not want to face the need for change in our own lives. Empower us to make the changes we need in order to be better followers of your Son, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Know the message. Live the message.
Be the message.