

Session Seven

Ezekiel: God's Watchman on the Wall



The Prophet Ezekiel by Michelangelo

A. Establish the Context

The first prophet we will study from the period of the Exile is Ezekiel.

In the last session, we saw that in 597 BC, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar swept down into Judah. Replacing King Jehoiachin with his uncle Mattaniah (renamed Zedekiah), he deported Jehoiachin to Babylon along with the Queen Mother and the best and brightest of the population. Many of these, one assumes, were the very people, priests, and leaders who rejected Jeremiah's pleas to repent, people who trusted in the existence of the Temple while ignoring what it signified—the presence of God with his people in covenant relationship with them. They, like so many, did not know the LORD.

Jeremiah, who is allowed to remain at home, continues to write to the Judeans exiled in Babylon. He insists that in spite of what certain false prophets have claimed, God himself has sent them into exile. While many might not believe it, Jerusalem will be destroyed, and their exile will be long—seventy years long, in fact. In time, God will begin the process of restoration: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

This may have been hard for the people to believe. According to Benedict XVI, the fact that both the land and the Temple had been lost was "incomprehensible ... a God who could not defend his worshipers and his worship was seen to be, at the time, a weak God. Indeed, he was no God at all; he had abandoned his divinity. And so, being driven out of their own land ... [was] a terrible trial: Has our God been vanquished, and is our faith void?"¹

There are three "waves" of exile to Babylon, culminating in 587 BC with the destruction of the Temple. Among those exiled in the second wave is a young priest named Ezekiel, whose name means "God strengthens." True to his name, he is strengthened to speak to the other exiles even though they do not want to hear, and he bears witness to the God who is not confined to a particular piece of land, but who, as Benedict XVI continues, "could drive his faithless people into another land in order to make himself known there."² Ezekiel bears witness to the God who gives renewed strength to his weakened people even in exile.

¹ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *In the Beginning ...: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 11.

² *Ibid.*

While Jeremiah utters his prophetic message from Jerusalem, Ezekiel prophesies from exile in Babylon. His visions and messages are larger than life, even bizarre. He uses apocalyptic language to describe what he sees and to convey his message. Perhaps he believes he must shout and startle those who are deaf and blind to God to get their attention. Given the people's loss of the knowledge of God, it should not surprise us that Ezekiel's prophecy is marked by dramatic visions revealing God's glory and presence—or that the phrase, “Then you will know that I am the LORD” (Ezekiel 7:4) tolls like a bell throughout the book.³

B. Read the Story

Read Ezekiel 1–3, 11:14–25, 11:34, 43:1–17, 47:1–12 before you answer the questions. (At this point, read to get a feel for the book, not to understand it fully.) Next, locate Ezekiel on your *Bible Timeline Chart*, paying attention to the time period and pertinent events during that time, to the king (or kings) who reigned during his time, and when and to whom he is speaking.

Going Deeper (optional): To get the full story and message of this prophet, read the entire book of Ezekiel.

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you do not understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the small-group discussion.

EZEKIEL'S CALL AND MINISTRY (EZEKIEL 1–3)

Psalm 137 captures the lament of the exiles: “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs. ... How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1–4). Let that image set the scene for Ezekiel, whom we meet by a river in Babylon (called here “the land of the Chaldeans”).

1. Read Ezekiel 1. Here, the prophet describes how the Word of the LORD came to him in a strange and glorious vision. This is not an easy read. Even the great Church Father and Scripture scholar St. Jerome found Ezekiel to be a puzzle. Try not to get caught up in the details of the vision; simply read for the general sense of it.
 - a. Where is Ezekiel? Where is the throne in Ezekiel's vision?
 - b. **Think About It:** What is the significance of this, as compared to the location of the throne in Isaiah's vision? (See Isaiah 6:1–4 and “Establish the Context” on page 61–62.)

³ See Ezekiel 7:4, 28:23, 28:24, 28:26, 29:6, 29:16, 29:21, and 32:15.

2. a. Given the charge brought by several of the prophets that the people do not know the LORD, this vision may be as important for the people to read as it is for Ezekiel to witness. What might they learn about God from Ezekiel 1?

- b. **Think About It:** Today it might be hard to imagine God as tied to a particular physical country. But do we perhaps live as though he is confined to our churches? Comment on this. What application does Ezekiel 1 have for you?

THE MEANING OF “SON OF MAN”

God does not address Ezekiel by name in these visions, but ninety-three times the prophet is called “son of man” (in Hebrew, *ben-’adam*). Jesus will later apply this title to himself. Here in Ezekiel, however, the phrase does not have messianic overtones. Rather, it identifies Ezekiel as a human being, highlighting his creaturely standing and contrasting him with the almighty and glorious Yahweh.

3. Read Ezekiel 2:1–3:11, in which the Spirit enters Ezekiel and commissions him to speak on his behalf to “a nation of rebels” (Ezekiel 2:3), “impudent and stubborn” (Ezekiel 2:4); a rebellious house who may well refuse to listen to him. What is the scroll he is given, and what is the significance of having Ezekiel eat it?

4. Read Ezekiel 3:12–21. What does it mean that God makes Ezekiel a “watchman” (Ezekiel 3:17) for the house of Israel? How critical is it for him to do his job?

JUDGMENT ON JERUSALEM (EZEKIEL 4–24)

Ezekiel is made to identify with God's message, sometimes in dramatic ways. The LORD strikes him dumb until Jerusalem falls, only allowing him to speak when he has a direct message to relay. At other times, he is to embody his message through his actions. For example, Ezekiel is told to build a model of Jerusalem and symbolically enact the siege that will come against it. He is also told to illustrate Jerusalem's destruction by burning, striking, and scattering his own shaved hair. "This is Jerusalem," God says (Ezekiel 5:5)—then details its fate.⁴

5. The prophets speak of a "day of the LORD"⁵—not a single day, but a final day of reckoning, when God's glory and power will be revealed. Read Ezekiel 7:2-3, 7:5-7, 7:10, 7:12-13. What "has come" to Jerusalem?

6. a. One year and one month after the chariot vision (592 BC, five years before the fall of Jerusalem) Ezekiel is transported to Jerusalem in a vision and shown terrible atrocities: idols standing in the Temple itself; elders, convinced the LORD does not see them, burning incense to idols there; and men with their backs to the Temple (the ultimate insult), worshipping the sun toward the east (Ezekiel 8). God calls on six divine "executioners" in Ezekiel 9 to deliver his wrath to the city. Before sending them to do their deadly work, what does God ask? (Read Ezekiel 9:3-6.)

- b. **Catechism Connection:** Read CCC 1296. What do these Old Testament "marks" prefigure in the New Covenant today?

7. In Ezekiel 10, wheeled cherubim like those in Ezekiel 1 appear over the court of the Temple. Read Ezekiel 10:3-4, 10:18-19, 11:22-23. Trace the movement of the glory of the LORD, and comment on its significance.

⁴ See Ezekiel 5:12: "A third part of you shall die of pestilence and be consumed with famine in the midst of you; a third part shall fall by the sword round about you; and a third part I will scatter to all the winds and will unsheathe the sword after them."

⁵ See Isaiah 13:6, 13:9, and 58:13; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 13:5 and 30:3; Joel 1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31 (NAB 3:4), and 3:14 (NAB 4:14); Amos 5:18, 5:20; Obadiah 1:15; Zephaniah 1:7, 1:8, 1:14; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi 4:5 (NAB 3:23).

FUTURE RESTORATION (EZEKIEL 33–48)

Eventually the time comes for God to act (Ezekiel 24:14). Ezekiel’s wife dies suddenly, a sign that the Temple—the delight of Israel—will be profaned and many of those left behind in Jerusalem will die. But the “day of the LORD” involves not just wrath but a promise of restoration. Several times, God says he will take initiative: that “he himself” will remember his covenant and establish an everlasting one which promises the forgiveness of sins (Ezekiel 16:60-63);⁶ he will give them a new heart and spirit (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26); he will replant them in the land (Ezekiel 17:22-24); and perhaps most beautifully, he will search for and shepherd his people.

8. Read Ezekiel 34.

- a. Who are the shepherds addressed in Ezekiel 34:1-10, and what charge does the LORD make against them?
- b. What will God do for his sheep, according to Ezekiel 34:11-16?
- c. In Ezekiel 34:23-24, there is a transition from “I myself” (the shepherd in Ezekiel 34:15) to another who will shepherd the sheep. Who is it? Describe him.

9. New Testament Connection: Read the following passages from John’s Gospel and answer the questions.

John 10:11-18: How does Jesus resolve this dilemma between God and his “servant David” shepherding his sheep? (See also CCC 754.)

John 6:51-58: If Jesus is the Good Shepherd described by Ezekiel, how does he feed his flock?

10. God’s restoration of Israel will go far beyond returning the people to the land. Their exile is a reflection of their self-imposed, internal “exile” from communion with God. A true return will need to be effected internally as well. Read Ezekiel 36:22-27. What does God promise, and why?

⁶ This is the same promise God spoke through Jeremiah in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel 37 contains an unforgettable picture of the promised restoration: a valley of dry, dead bones brought to life and filled with the living Spirit of God. The word *ruah* (breath, wind, spirit) is used ten times in the chapter (four times in Ezekiel 37:9 alone). This same breath brought life to the dust that became Adam and will fill the disciples with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This same animating power is given to us in the sacraments.

11. Fourteen years after the conquest of Jerusalem, Ezekiel is granted a vision in which a future, restored Temple is revealed and measured.
 - a. Read Ezekiel 43:1-7. What does he see, and what is he told?
 - b. In Ezekiel 47, Ezekiel describes the life-giving, healing waters pouring forth from the Temple.⁷ The renewed Temple will be at the heart of the renewed land of Israel and a renewed Jerusalem. What will be the name of the city? (See Ezekiel 48:35.)
12. God's beautiful promise of a new, indwelling Spirit has been fulfilled at Pentecost, and all the baptized now receive this marvelous gift. Read CCC 736, 1432. What about God's gift of a new heart and spirit, as explained here, particularly speaks to you, and why?

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the session to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

Do you or your parish feel dry or lifeless like the dry bones in Ezekiel 37? Read that chapter again, and consider how you can take hope from that vision and its revelation of the power of God.

Dear Lord ...

⁷ For further study, compare Ezekiel's Temple vision with John's vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22, and see John's use of this imagery in John 7:37–39, 19:34.

SESSION SEVEN TALK NOTES

Ezekiel: God's Watchman on the Wall**I. Setting the Stage**

- A. Background
 1. Place on *Bible Timeline Chart*
 2. Audience
- B. Relevance to today
- C. Command to write what he sees

II. Ezekiel's Vision (Ezekiel 1)

- A. Time – “the thirtieth year” (Ezekiel 1:1)
- B. Place – “the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar” (Ezekiel 1:3)
 1. Psalm 137
 2. Their circumstances
- C. Vision of God's throne
 1. Striking images reveal God's glory (*kavod*: “heavy”)
 2. Ezekiel's response (Ezekiel 1:28) compared to Isaiah 6
 3. Significance of chariot
 - a. God present with them
 - b. Power, glory extend throughout earth
 - c. God a “sanctuary” to them (Ezekiel 11:16)
 4. Purpose of the vision

III. Ezekiel's Task and Message

- A. Combat denial; Jerusalem's destruction inevitable
- B. Call to repentance, conversion
- C. He is a “watchman on the wall”
- D. Wake them up to their spiritual distance
- E. Warning through words and symbolic actions

IV. Vision of the Jerusalem Temple (Ezekiel 8)

- A. The glory of the LORD
- B. Abominations, idolatry
- C. The faithful remnant marked with a sign (Ezekiel 9)

1. The *tau*
2. Power in signs
3. Signs of belonging and God's presence in the world
- D. The glory of the LORD departs (Ezekiel 10 and 11)
 1. Lament over their unfaithfulness
 2. Compare Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34)
- V. **The Fall of Jerusalem and the Temple (Ezekiel 24)**
 - A. Ezekiel's wife dies as the Temple falls
- VI. **Ezekiel's "Book of Consolation"**
 - A. Words of hope after fall of Jerusalem
 - B. Rebuke on the wicked shepherds of Judah (Ezekiel 34)
 1. Promise that God himself will shepherd his sheep (Ezekiel 34:11-16)
 2. Jesus attributes these words to himself
 - C. Promise of new heart and spirit; hearts of flesh in place of stone (Ezekiel 36:26)
 1. Fulfilled first at Pentecost
 2. Gift given at baptism, confirmation, Eucharist: God's Spirit in us
 3. *Ezekiel* means "to be strengthened by God"
 4. His mission is ours
- VII. **Conclusion: Prayer of Renewal^s**

^s For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.