

Living in the light of God's Presence - an Introduction to Ezekiel

If I were to ask you to name your favourite book of the Bible, what would it be? Chances are it wouldn't be Ezekiel! For a variety of reasons some of them understandable, there are some books of the Bible that are frequently neglected in our churches and Bible Studies, and one such book is the Prophecy of Ezekiel. It is not that people know nothing about the book: in fact, chapter 37 and the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is often known by many, however the book as a whole lies to one side gathering dust for most Christians.

Ezekiel has so much to teach us especially for the current season of life we find ourselves in, so today and over the next few weeks we'll be finding out what Ezekiel is all about. In addition in Life Groups, there's the opportunity to go deeper into Ezekiel - if you'd like to join a Life Group (via Zoom) for this time, please let me know! I also need to acknowledge that my key source for today's sermon comes from one of my Theological Advisers - Julie Robb, my wife!

Who, When, Where?

Ezekiel, unlike some of the other prophetic writings, is a book that provides quite a lot of information about the prophet, the time during which he prophesied and the circumstances into which he prophesied.

The first thing we know about Ezekiel is that he was a priest before he was a prophet. In chapter 1:3 we read: *'the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi'*

We also know from chapter 1:1 that Ezekiel's ministry as a prophet i.e. when God called him into that role, began when he was *'in his thirtieth year'*.

As to Ezekiel's location, Chapter 1 verses 1 & 3 tell us he was *'by the River Kebar...in the land of the Babylonians'*. This river was part of a larger group of canals that provided irrigation from the River Euphrates and Tigris to the fields and orchards in the heart of the Mesopotamian area. More significantly, he was there because he was 'among the exiles' in Babylon and it was among this group that Ezekiel prophesied with his entire prophetic ministry taking place in Babylon.

We are also told that it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin (1:2). This tells us that Ezekiel was among this first group of exiles and, given that it was the 'fifth year'

of the exile, we can date Ezekiel's call to 593/592 BC. We also know that he was still prophesying in the 27th year of the exile (572/571 BC) so his prophetic ministry lasted at least 22 years and encompassed some of the most traumatic years in the history of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) and its capital Jerusalem.

When we come to the structure of Ezekiel, it can be divided into three parts.

- i. Judgement on Judah and Jerusalem which covers chapters 1-24
- ii. Oracles against foreign nations, covering chapters 25-32
- iii. Blessing for Judah and Jerusalem, which covers chapters 33-48

Although it is possible to break each of these macro sections down further into micro sections, this helps to give us a sense of how Ezekiel is constructed.

So first, chapters 1-24 which focus on the judgement on Judah and Jerusalem

Throughout this opening section of the prophecy, Ezekiel's message is unrelenting in its accusations against Jerusalem and the judgment coming against it. Time and time again, Ezekiel warns the exiles that the events that were taking place were God's judgement on them, and that the time of exile would **not** be short. We'll focus on these themes in the week's ahead.

This is followed by chapters 25-32 that are Oracles against Foreign Nations

Now the use of Oracles is a feature of many of the OT prophecies contained in Scripture, because part of their function is to demonstrate that God is LORD of all the nations, not just of Israel and Judah. In Ezekiel, the oracles are directed against:

Ammon (25:1-7); Moab (25:8-11); Edom (25:12-14); Philistia (25:15-17)

Tyre (26:1-19); Sidon (28:20-26) and Egypt (29:1-32:32)

Again, we'll explore some of these in a few week's time.

Finally we have in chapters 33-48 that is about Blessing for Judah and Jerusalem

As we enter chapter 33, following God reiterating to Ezekiel his role and responsibility as a watchman, the final tragedy for the exiles in Babylon occurs. The temple in Jerusalem falls and is destroyed (33:21). It is at this point, however, that the message Ezekiel brings begins to change, as Ezekiel begins to prophesy restoration and blessing for the people and for the nation.

This message begins with God promising that He would be Israel's shepherd in the future and restore the people. Chapter 34 is an extensive description of God as shepherd of his people - the good shepherd, the true shepherd in contrast to all the false shepherds who had gone before in Judah. As Julie Robb says - *it is a beautiful chapter - do read it when you have time.*

This picture of God as Shepherd of his people is woven throughout the OT (eg Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11), and on into the NT where it becomes clear that Jesus is that Good Shepherd. When Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd' in John 10, he is drawing on this important picture from the OT.

We then come to, what is possibly the most well-known chapter in Ezekiel's prophecy and that is chapter 37. 'Dem Bones' - RP will take us through this in a few weeks time.

The final chapters of Ezekiel then report a series of visions given to Ezekiel in which he sees the restored Israel with the renewed Temple at its heart. Julie will take us through some of these to conclude our series. So there we have an overview of Ezekiel.

As we journey together through Ezekiel, there are three key themes that we will hear time and time again and that we need to listen out for today.

These are: **First, the Holiness of God.** This reminds us that God is a Holy God who cannot tolerate sin and as such, it must be dealt with. God is hugely patient, but the sin of the people does require a response.

The Second & Third Themes which are interwoven concern both the Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility

Ezekiel recognised that God is entirely sovereign and that the people were the ones responsible for their own exile, not God. Neither could they blame it on previous generations.

Today we need to listen to these Themes and learn from them. It can be easy to think we may be better than previous generations or we may like to blame previous generations for where we are today, but in reality we are just the same. We are, to quote what the Israelites were called, 'a rebellious people' who like our own way.

We like to put our faith and trust in everything except God and leave God out of our daily lives. We like to be the arbiter on what is good and what is not.

Yet, we need to recognise afresh who God is. We need to realise that God's holiness cannot and should not be watered down in any way - if we choose to mess with God's holiness, we do so at our own peril, because God takes sin as seriously today as he did then.

But, the amazing message for us is that, because of the cross, we can approach our holy God and seek his forgiveness. The cross is the place where God's holiness and love meet.

Today, we also need to re-affirm that God is in control. When we look at the world, we may wonder whether that is in fact true, especially in the increasingly difficult times we find ourselves in.

The comfort we can take from Ezekiel is that, despite current appearances, God had not abandoned his throne - He is still in control of nations. Just as this was true for Ezekiel and the exiles, so it is true for us today.

Let us pray...