

“THE PROPHET’S CALL”

Ezekiel 1:1 - 5:17

NIV MEMORY VERSE: Ezekiel 3:17

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.”⁹⁹

Well friends, we finally finished our study in Jeremiah, and even a lesson in Lamentations. There is much to learn from the Prophet Ezekiel, so I thought we should just get into it.

What is known of Ezekiel is derived solely from the book that bears his name. He was among the Jews exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC, and there among the exiles he received his call to become a prophet. We know that he was married, lived in a house of his own, and, along with his fellow exiles, had a relatively free existence.

He was of a priestly family and therefore was eligible to serve as a priest. As a priest-prophet he was called to minister to the exiles, which were cut off from the temple of the Lord with its symbolism, sacrifices, priestly ministrations and worship rituals. His message had much to do with the temple and its ceremonies.

More than any other prophet he was directed to involve himself personally in the divine word by acting it out in prophetic symbolism.

Though Ezekiel lived with his fellow exiles in Babylon, his divine call forced him to suppress any natural expectations he may have had of an early return to an undamaged Jerusalem. For the first 7 years of his ministry he faithfully relayed to his fellow Jews the harsh, heart-rending, hope-crushing word of divine judgment that Jerusalem would fall. The Jews being God's covenant people and Jerusalem's being the city of his temple would not bring their early release from exile or

prevent Jerusalem from being destroyed. The only hope the prophet was authorized to extend to his hearers was to live at peace within themselves and with God during their exile.

Once news was received that Jerusalem had fallen, Ezekiel's message turned to the Lord's consoling word of hope for his people that they would experience revival, restoration, and a glorious future as the redeemed and perfected kingdom of God in the world.

Other prophets deal largely with Israel's idolatry, with her moral corruption in public and private affairs, and with her international intrigues and alliances which she relied on instead of the Lord. They announce God's impending judgment on his rebellious nation but speak also of a future redemption:

- a new exodus,
- a new covenant,
- a restored Jerusalem,
- a revived Davidic dynasty,
- a worldwide recognition of the Lord and his Messiah, and
- a paradise-like peace.

The content of Ezekiel's messages are similar to this, but he focuses uniquely on Israel as the holy people of the holy temple, the holy city and the holy land. By defiling her worship, Israel had rendered herself unclean and had defiled temple, city and land. From such defilement God could only withdraw and judge his people with national destruction.

But God's faithfulness to his covenant and his desire to save were so great that he would:

- revive his people once more,
- shepherd them with compassion,
- cleanse them of all their defilement,
- reconstitute them as a perfect expression of his kingdom in the promised land under the hand of David,
- overwhelm all the forces and powers arrayed against them, displaying his glory among the nations, and
- restore the glory of his presence to the holy city.

These are concepts of promise and hope that even we can cling to as believers.

A family story for you ... I have strong family ties to First Christian Church Huntington Beach. My father's family has lived in Huntington Beach since my grandfather was a boy. Come 4th of July the Worthy's love to gather in old town Huntington Beach for the annual parade, a potluck lunch, the annual blooper ball game, and fireworks. We've been celebrating the 4th this way for five generations.

One challenge for the city is when July 4th lands on a Sunday. In the past the city opted to hold the parade on a Saturday or Monday and leave Sunday to the churches. However, the last time (a few years ago) when July 4th landed on a Sunday, the city council voted to hold the parade on Sunday after all. If you know FCCHB, you know that the church is located at Main and Adams Streets, which is right on the parade route. Holding church on that Sunday would have been impossible. So ... what did the FCCHB leaders decide to do? The church set up their property with refreshment stations for water & coffee and they served the people. The church volunteers wore t-shirts printed with "The church has left the building". And that's what they did. They took the church outside the building and served the community. I thought it was a great witness under the circumstances.

The church left the building! And what we learn from Ezekiel is that God left the Temple. The exiles in Babylon needed to learn that God was not limited to His Temple in Jerusalem, and that He went to Babylon along with his children. It was a different concept for the Jews to understand the omnipresence of Jehovah God.

Ezekiel was a man who chose to obey God. Although he was a priest, he served as a Jewish 'street preacher' in Babylon for 22 years, willing to tell everyone about God's judgment and salvation, and calling them to repent and obey. Ezekiel

lived what he preached. During his ministry God told him to illustrate his messages with dramatic object lessons. These included:

- Lying on his side for 390 days during which he could eat only one 8 oz. meal a day cooked over manure,
- Shaving his head and beard, and
- Showing no sorrow when his wife died.

He obeyed and faithfully proclaimed God's word.

While Jeremiah was prophesying in Jerusalem that the city would soon fall to the Babylonians, Ezekiel was giving the same message to the captives who were already in Babylon. Like those in Jerusalem, the captives stubbornly believed that Jerusalem would not fall and that they would soon return to their land. Ezekiel warned them that punishment was certain because of their sins and that God was purifying his people. God will always punish sin, whether we believe it or not.

Why did the Jewish exiles in Babylonia need a prophet? Because false prophets were in abundance and were giving the Jewish people false hopes of a quick deliverance (usually by Egypt) and a triumphant return to their land.

God wanted Ezekiel to:

- Help the exiles understand why they had been taken captive,
- Dispel the false hope that the captivity was going to be short,
- Bring a new message of hope, and
- Call the people to a new awareness of their dependence upon God.

The name 'Ezekiel' means "God is strong" or "God strengthens." In spite of the captivity, God's sovereign strength prevails, and he will judge his enemies and restore his true people.

The most difficult task of a prophet is to change people's minds. This means pulling up the weeds of false theology and planting the good seed of the Word of God. It also means tearing down the flimsy thought structures that false prophets build and constructing in their place lasting buildings on solid foundations of truth. To prepare him for his difficult ministry, the Lord caused Ezekiel to participate in 3 dramatic experiences.

1. Beholding the Glory of the Lord

2. Accepting the Burden of the Lord

3. Declaring the Word of the Lord

The Glory of the Lord: When Ezekiel received his vision, he was far away from the temple in Jerusalem, the physical symbol of God's presence. The first thing Ezekiel needed to understand was that, no matter how discouraging the circumstances, God was still on the throne accomplishing His divine purposes in the world. One message comes through with clarity and power: Jehovah is the sovereign Lord of Israel and of all the nations of the earth!

- The Storm - The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel in the form of a vision, and the hand of the Lord laid hold of him and claimed him for special service. The word of the Lord brings enlightenment and the hand of the Lord enablement. In Scripture, a storm is often an image of divine judgment. Since the immense whirlwind cloud Ezekiel beheld was coming from the north, it indicated the invasion of Judah by the Babylonian army and the destruction of the land, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple. ... Ezekiel saw bright light around the cloud and an enfolding fire, like molten metal, within the cloud. Both are reminders of the holiness of God, for "our God is a consuming fire."
- The Cherubim - Ezekiel identified the living creatures as the cherubim. Of special interest are their four faces: a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Man is the highest of God's creatures, being made in the image of God. The lion is the greatest of the untamed beasts of the forest, while the ox is the strongest of the domesticated beasts of the field. The eagle is the greatest of the birds and is even a picture of God (Deut 32:11-12). There is also a connection here with the covenant God made with Noah after the flood. God promised not to destroy the world again with a flood and he gave his promise to Noah (a man) and his descendants, the birds (the eagle), the livestock (the ox), and the wild animals (the lion). The presence of the cherubim before the throne of God is God's assurance that He remembers

His promise and cares for His creatures. It also reminds us that all of creation is used by the Lord to bless or to chasten His people. In this vision, they are a part of God's judgment on His sinful people.

Man	Highest creature made in God's image	Noah/man	Intelligence	Luke	Christ as the perfect human
Lion	Greatest untamed beast	Wild animals	Strength	Matthew	Christ as the Lion of Judah
Ox	Strongest domestic beast	Livestock	Diligent service	Mark	Christ as the Servant
Eagle	Greatest bird	Birds	Divinity	John	Christ as the Son of God, exalted and divine

- The Wheels - There were 4 wheels, each with an intersecting wheel and each associated with one of the cherubim. The intersecting wheels enabled the creatures and the cloud to move in any direction instantly without having to turn, moving like a flash of lightening. The spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels, so that the living creatures moved in whatever direction the wheels moved. It was indeed an awesome sight, the huge wheels, the living creatures, the enfolding fire, and the eyes in the rims of the wheels. ... What an arresting picture of the providence of God, always at work, intricately designed, never wrong, and never late!
- The Firmament - Now we get the total picture: a heavenly chariot with 4 wheels, moving quickly from place to place at the direction of the Lord. As

it moved, the noise of the wings of the cherubim sounded like the noise of great waters coming together, "like the voice of the Almighty," and like the sound of a mighty army. ... The wheels symbolize the omnipresence of God, while the eyes on their rims suggest the omniscience of God, seeing and knowing everything. Ezekiel was beholding a representation of the providence of God as He worked in His world.

- The Throne - The wheels depicted God's omnipresence and omniscience, and the throne speaks of God's omnipotent authority. The throne was azure blue, with flashes of fire within it, and a rainbow around it.
- Noah saw the rainbow after the storm,
- the apostle John saw it before the storm (Rev. 4:3), but
- Ezekiel saw it over the storm and in control of the storm.

The glory of the Lord is one of the key themes in Ezekiel. Because of Israel's sins, the glory left the temple; but God's promise is that one day the city of Jerusalem and the temple will be blessed by the glorious presence of the Lord. The city will be called "Jehovah Shammah - the Lord is there".

Though His people were in exile and their nation was about to be destroyed, God was still on the throne and able to handle every situation. In His marvelous providence, He moves in the affairs of nations and works out His hidden plan. Israel wasn't the victim of Babylonian aggression. It was God who enabled the Babylonians to conquer His people and chasten them for their rebellion, but God would also bring the Medes and the Persians to conquer Babylon, and Cyrus, the king of Persia, would permit the Jews to return to their land.

Can you see now? God had left the building (or the Temple), but He didn't leave the people – And He doesn't leave you and I either.

Accepting the Burden of the Lord

Ezekiel was now to receive his official commission as a prophet of the Lord God, and the Lord told him he was facing a very difficult task. God gave Ezekiel 4 important commandments to obey.

1. Stand and listen

2. Go and speak

3. Don't be afraid

4. Receive the Word within

1. 1. Stand and listen - As a result of beholding the vision, Ezekiel fell to the ground, completely overwhelmed by the glory of the Lord and the wonder of His providential working in the world. Ezekiel recognized his helplessness before God and fell facedown in his presence. Sometimes our prosperity, popularity, or physical strength blinds us to our spiritual helplessness. But nothing we do on our own can accomplish much for God. Only when God is in control of our wills can we accomplish great tasks for him. The first step to being God's person is to admit that you need his help; then you can begin to see what God can really do in your life.

There is a time to fall down in humble adoration, and there is a time to stand up and take orders. The command of the Word and the power of the Spirit enabled Ezekiel to stand to his feet, and the Spirit entered him and strengthened him. The important thing was that Ezekiel stand obediently before the Lord and listen to His word.

1. 2. Go and speak - The Jews needed to hear Ezekiel's message because they were rebellious, stiff-necked, and hard-hearted. They had revolted against the Lord and were obstinate in their refusal to submit to His will. Their refusal to obey the terms of the covenant had led to their defeat and

capture by the Babylonian army. Even in their captivity, they were nursing false hopes that Egypt would come to their rescue or the Lord would do a great miracle. Whether the people listened and obeyed or turned a deaf ear, Ezekiel had to be faithful to his task.

1. **3. Don't be afraid** - Ezekiel was to declare God's word boldly no matter how his listeners responded. Ezekiel was bitter and angry, not at God, but at the sins and attitudes of the people. Ezekiel's extraordinary vision had ended, and he had to begin the tedious job of prophesying among his people, who cared little about God's message. Before the exile, the people had heard Jeremiah, but they would not listen. Here Ezekiel had to give a similar message, and he expected to be rejected as well. But Ezekiel had the vision of the living creatures and the rumbling wheels on his side. He had nothing to fear because God was with him. Despite knowing the likely outcome, Ezekiel obeyed God.

1. **4. Receive the Word within** - Being a priest, Ezekiel knew that the Hebrew Scriptures pictured God's Word as food to be received within the heart and digested inwardly. God's prophets must speak from within their hearts or their messages will not be authentic.

A hand stretched out and handed Ezekiel a scroll that didn't have any good news written on it, because it was filled on both sides with "words of lament and mourning and woe." God commanded him to eat the scroll and it tasted sweet like honey, although later he tasted bitterness. It's a great honor to be a spokesperson for the Lord, but we must be able to handle both the bitter and the sweet.

Declaring the Word of the Lord

What the people needed more than anything else was to hear the Word of the Lord. Jeremiah warned them not to listen to the false prophets, but neither the leaders nor the common people would obey. The human heart would rather hear lies that bring comfort than truths that bring conviction and cleansing. Ezekiel declared God's word as:

- A messenger
- A sufferer
- A watchman

- A sign
- The Messenger - Three elements are involved here: speaking, receiving (understanding) the message, and obeying. One of the New Testament words for preaching is 'kerusso', which means "to proclaim as a herald." In ancient days, rulers would send out royal heralds to convey their messages to the people, and the herald was obligated to deliver the message just as he received it. If Ezekiel wanted to be a faithful herald, every part of God's commission had to be obeyed to the last detail.

The second element is receiving. To receive the Word of God means to understand it and take it into the heart and mind. Since Ezekiel was a chosen prophet of the Lord, what he said was important, and the people were obligated to receive it. He was speaking their own language, so they couldn't make excuses. He understood their speech and they understood his.

The third element is obeying. God expects us to obey what He commands. Unfortunately, the nation of Israel had a tragic history of disobedience to the law of God and rebellion against the will of God. Like the people of Israel, many people today hear God's Word but won't try to understand, or if they do understand, they refuse to obey.

God assured his prophet that He would give him all he needed to withstand the opposition and disobedience of the people. In Ezekiel 3:8 there is a play on words involving Ezekiel's name, which means "God is strong" or "God strengthens." It also means "God hardens." If the people harden their hearts and faces, God will harden His servant and keep him faithful to his mission.

- The Sufferer - The Spirit of God lifted the prophet up and took him to the place where the captives were gathered together and probably praying. This remarkable experience would be repeated. The prophet had received God's word, and now he must take it to the people.

The Lord brought Ezekiel to Tel-Abib so he could sit with the captives and feel their burden of disappointment and grief. Psalm 137 reveals both their misery and their hatred for the Babylonians. When they should have been repenting and seeking God's face, the Jews were regretting what had happened and praying that one day they might be able to retaliate and defeat their Babylonian captors who taunted them. As Ezekiel sat with the people, overwhelmed by what the Lord had

said to him and done for him, he realized the seriousness of his calling and how great was the responsibility God had placed on his shoulders. It isn't enough to proclaim the message of God; we must also seek to have the caring heart of God.

- The Watchman - The watchman on the walls were important to the safety of the city, and the image shows up frequently in the Scriptures. Spiritually speaking, the "wall" that protected Israel was their covenant relationship with the Lord. If they obeyed the terms of the covenant declared by Moses, God would care for His people, protect them, and bless them. If they disobeyed, God would chasten them. Whether He was chastening or blessing, God would always be faithful to His covenant.

Ezekiel is the prophet of human responsibility. Some of the captives were blaming God for their sad plight, while others blamed their ancestors. Ezekiel made it clear that each individual is held responsible and accountable before God. He presented 4 scenarios:

The people dying because the watchman was unfaithful and didn't warn them.	Their blood was on the watchman's hands and he would be held accountable.
The watchman being faithful to warn the wicked but they refuse to listen.	The problem Ezekiel faced as he preached to the hard-hearted Jewish captives in Babylon.
The righteous dying because they turned from their covenant obedience and the watchman did not warn them.	The watchman-prophet should not only warn sinners to turn from their sin, he must also warn those who are obeying the covenant not to turn from it and disobey God. However, their blood would be on the watchman's hands if he didn't warn them.
The righteous heeding the watchman's warning and not being judged.	It was a serious thing for the Jewish people to treat lightly the covenant that had been accepted and sealed at Sinai. If the watchman-prophet saw faithful

people about to break the covenant, he had to warn them that they would be judged.

Our fellowship with the father depends on a heart of obedience, and He will discipline those of His children who deliberately oppose His will. If they persist in resisting His will, He may take their lives. Personal responsibility is the key here, both of the watchman and of the people. If the Jews under the old covenant were held responsible for their actions, how much more responsible are believers today who have the complete Bible, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the revelation of God through Jesus Christ?

- The Sign - Ezekiel not only spoke God's word to the people, he also lived before them in such a way that they saw God's message portrayed before their very eyes. The prophet performs twelve "action sermons" to convey God's truth to people who were becoming more and more deaf to the voice of God. ...

The word of God may not have penetrated the hearts of the people, but the glory of God and the Spirit of God were still with God's servant Ezekiel. The prophet shut himself up in his house, although at times he did leave for special reasons, and he never spoke unless he had a message from the Lord. When the news came of the destruction of Jerusalem, this command of silence was removed, and he was able to speak as other people. From the time this command was given to the time it was removed, seven years passed.

Ezekiel's silence was a sign to the Jews that God's Word is not to be taken for granted or treated lightly like trivial daily conversation. When God speaks, we had better listen and obey! "He that hears, let him hear" is a familiar and important phrase in Scripture because it indicates that we have a responsibility to pay attention to God's Word, cherish what He says, meditate on it, and obey it.

I don⁹t know about you, but the lessons of Jeremiah and Lamentations were somewhat depressing. The encouraging thing about the beginning of Ezekiel is the sense of hope that God has a greater purpose to the exile in Babylon. The

thing is that we are all exiles and we all have a “Babylon”⁹⁹ in our lives.

Sometimes in the midst of our trials we need some encouragement.

I want to leave you today with a feeling of encouragement and hope.

Behold He comes, Riding on the clouds,

Shining like the sun, At the trumpet’s call

Lift your voice, the year of Jubilee

Out of Zion’s hill, salvation comes.