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**— August 2003 —**

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-11 Aug	11-DAY BREAK	
12-13 Aug	Ezekiel's vision of cherubim and God's throne	Ezekiel 1
14-15 Aug	Ezekiel called and commissioned as watchman	Ezekiel 2-3
16-17 Aug	Mock siege against Jerusalem	Ezekiel 4
18-19 Aug	A third to die by pestilence and famine, a third by the sword and a third scattered	Ezekiel 5
20-21 Aug	Judgment on the mountains of Israel	Ezekiel 6
22-23 Aug	The end has come	Ezekiel 7
24-25 Aug	Pagan sunrise service in God's temple	Ezekiel 8
26-27 Aug	Call for the wicked to be slain but those who mourn abominations spared	Ezekiel 9
28-29 Aug	Glory of God departs from the temple with the cherubim	Ezekiel 10
30-31 Aug	Leaders judged; Israel to be restored; Glory moves east	Ezekiel 11

## Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

### 11-DAY BREAK

**August 1-11**

*This 11-day break is an opportunity for catch-up reading. Also, you will notice that each reading this month is spread over two days. We are temporarily slowing the pace of the program during this time of family summer vacations. Besides allowing those who have fallen behind to catch up, this will give those who are already caught up time for deeper personal study in areas of particular interest while going through the program.*

### Introduction to Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1)

**August 12-13**

Recall from 2 Kings 24:10-16 that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and took away 10,000 captives, including the Jewish king Jehoiachin (or Jeconiah). This was the second Babylonian deportation of the Jews, which took place in 597 B.C. The prophet Ezekiel was among a group of these captives, as the Jewish historian Josephus also relates (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 10, chap. 6, sec. 3). Ezekiel's group was resettled "by the River Chebar" (1:1), southeast of Babylon. "Ezekiel 1:1-3 and 3:15 clearly define the place of origin of Ezekiel's ministry as Babylonia, specifically at the site of Tel Aviv located near the Kebar River and the ancient site of Nippur. This 'River' has been identified by many with the naru kabari [or 'grand canal'] (mentioned in two cuneiform texts from Nippur), a canal making a southeasterly loop, connecting at both ends with the Euphrates River" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, introduction to Ezekiel). During this period the Jews were allowed to live in communities in whatever area of the empire to which they were transported. They seem to have been viewed more as colonists than slaves. Ezekiel himself was married until his wife suddenly died, and he had a house (24:15-18; 3:24; 8:1). Elders of Judah frequently consulted him (8:1; 11:25; 14:1; 20:1; etc.).

The book of Ezekiel begins with an account of the prophet's calling, which occurred "in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month" (1:1). This date is equated in verse 2 with "the fifth day of the month...in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity." Since the captivity began in 597 B.C., the fifth year would have been 593. Some understand the 30th year to be counted from Josiah's renewal of the covenant between God and Judah in the 18th year of his reign, 623-622 B.C. (see 2 Chronicles 34:8, 29-33). However, there is nothing to hint at such a connection, and the covenant had long since been trampled upon in the 16 years since Josiah's death. A more reasonable conclusion is that the 30th year refers to Ezekiel's age, especially when we consider that he was a priest (Ezekiel 1:3). Since a man entered into priestly service at the age of 30 (Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 39, 43; 1 Chronicles 23:3), God may have elected to start using him as a prophet at this critical age, perhaps highlighting the priestly aspect of Ezekiel's commission. It is interesting to note that if he were 30 years old at this point, Ezekiel would have been born at the time of Josiah's covenant renewal.

There is a strong emphasis on chronology throughout the book of Ezekiel. It contains 13 prophecies dated from the time Jeconiah was taken into exile—the first in 593, the last in 571 (thus spanning 22 years). Four periods are specified: the first five years, 593-588 B.C. (1:1–25:17); the next two years, 587-585 B.C., surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in 586 (26:1–29:16; 30:20–39:29); 12 years later, 573 B.C. (40:1–48:35); and a final message against Egypt two years after that, 571 B.C. (29:17–30:19).

Ezekiel's commission was to serve as a "watchman" for God's people—a sentry who warned of impending danger (see Ezekiel 3; 33). As we will see, his messages were meant in large part for the "house of Israel," even though the northern 10 tribes had been taken into captivity about 130 years earlier (3:1, 4, 3, 7, 17; 33:7, 10, 11, 20). In fact, the phrase "house of Israel" occurs 78 times (plus "house of Jacob" one time) in this book while "house of Judah" occurs only 5 times. In some cases, the name Israel is used to designate Judah—but there are numerous instances where it is clear that the northern tribes are meant. Since God would never be a century late in delivering a warning message, it seems clear that He must have inspired significant portions of the book primarily for the end-time descendants of Israel. However, some of the specific prophecies were meant for Ezekiel's time, and some others are dual—meant for Ezekiel's day *and* the end time. The spiritually deteriorating conditions in Judah were a type of the end-time decline of modern Israelite nations, and the

approaching destruction and captivity of Judah was a type of what would happen to the nations of Israel—especially the descendants of Joseph—just prior to Christ’s return.

In the setting in which Ezekiel found himself, he taught, comforted and encouraged the Jews who were with him in exile. As part of his watchman responsibility, he was also to relay to them God’s warnings of Jerusalem’s coming destruction due to the sins of the Jewish people. And he proved faithful in delivering these important messages, even acting out various judgments or prophecies at God’s direction to make the point clear. At the same time, as we’ve seen, the prophet Jeremiah was giving a similar warning 600 miles away in Jerusalem to the Jews who were living there. Interestingly, both Ezekiel and Jeremiah were priests called to a prophetic office. A comparative study of their messages provides a clear picture of how much God warned the Jews to repent before their nation was destroyed in 586 B.C. Indeed, we’ve seen that Jeremiah sent messages to the exiles in Babylon (see Jeremiah 29–30). Perhaps some of Ezekiel’s prophecies were likewise proclaimed to the Jews of Judah—by letter or just through the reporting of others. Of course, as with those of Jeremiah, many of Ezekiel’s prophecies were, as already noted, recorded principally for posterity’s sake—with many having dual or even exclusive application to events far in the future.

One of the recurrent themes in Ezekiel’s prophecies is that God is sovereign and people will ultimately learn that lesson. The phrase “Then they will know that I am the LORD” occurs no less than 65 times in the book. Jerusalem is the focal point of Ezekiel’s prophecies. He begins with what was to occur to Jerusalem in his day and then moves on to the events prophesied for the end of the age. (He closes the book with a wonderful vision of conditions that will exist after the return of Christ.) Yet throughout the first 34 chapters, Ezekiel moves back and forth between prophecies for his own day and the end time—many of the historical events foretold serving as types of what is to come in the end time.

Ezekiel’s name means “God Is Strong” (compare Ezekiel 3:14), “God Strengthens” (compare Ezekiel 30:25; 34:16) or “May God Strengthen.” As the book opens, we see how God strengthened him with powerful visions so he could perform the job he was called to do.

### **“The Appearance of the Likeness of the Glory of the LORD” (Ezekiel 1) Aug. 12-13 Cont’d**

The first chapter of Ezekiel is one of the most revealing and exciting in the entire Bible! Ezekiel tells us that the heavens opened and he saw “visions of God”—i.e., not God in reality, but rather in a mental picture, which no one else who might have been with Ezekiel could actually see. Of all the men whom God inspired to write the Scriptures only three—Isaiah, Ezekiel and the apostle John—recorded visions of God’s throne. Isaiah’s description, which we earlier read, is very short (Isaiah 6:1-6). Ezekiel gives us much more detail.

The “hand of the LORD” on Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:3) represented the strength God was imparting to him. In addition to verification that God was the author of the message, Ezekiel needed encouragement and strength from God in order to do the work God was commissioning him to do (which we will read about in chapters 2–3, a continuation of the same passage).

Ezekiel sees a great windstorm coming—an immense cloud with flashing lightning, surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing, sparkling gold (1:4). This is perhaps reminiscent of the pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel out of Egypt. Recall that the preincarnate Jesus Christ dwelt in that cloud, which was illuminated with divine “glory,” the shining radiance of God. Indeed, “the glory of the LORD” is specifically mentioned here in Ezekiel (1:28; 3:12). The word for glory “suggests ‘weight’ or ‘significance,’ indicating the wonder, majesty, and worthiness of the living God” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on 3:12-13). This visible glory was referred to by later Jewish commentators as the *shekinah*, or “indwelling,” as it was the evidence of God’s presence among His people. The *shekinah* glory not only led Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 16:10), it also appeared in the tabernacle (40:34), in the temple of Solomon (2 Chronicles 5:14), to the shepherds at Christ’s birth (Luke 2:9), and as surrounding God’s throne in John’s vision (Revelation 15:8).

The throne imagery here is somewhat different from that of God the Father’s heavenly throne room in Revelation. That’s because this image is of a transportable throne moving about the *earth*—and the “LORD” who sits on this particular throne is, again, the preincarnate Jesus Christ. Still, there are some clear similarities, as we will see.

The whirlwind comes from the north—perhaps because the *north* seems to indicate the general area of the sky where the heaven of God’s throne is located (Lucifer is pictured attempting to assault God’s throne *on the farthest sides of the north*—Isaiah 14:13). Whirlwinds from God are recorded several times in the Scriptures. The Ten Commandments were given in a great tempest of thunder and fire (Exodus 19–20). Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1, 11) and the Lord answered

Job out of a whirlwind (Job 38:1; 40:6). Jesus Christ will return to the earth in a whirlwind (Isaiah 66:15; Zechariah 9:14). Interestingly, this passage of Ezekiel was in Christ's day read in synagogues at the time of Pentecost, and it was on Pentecost that a sound of rushing wind and tongues of fire accompanied the coming of God's Holy Spirit to empower members of His Church (see Acts 2; compare Ezekiel 2:2).

As the whirlwind approached, Ezekiel was able to make out the likenesses of four living creatures—angelic beings. These are referred to in Ezekiel 10 as cherubs or cherubim. Their function here is to uphold and transport the throne of God. "And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man" (1:5). The word *likeness* is translated from the Hebrew *dmuwth*, which means resemblance. They had the general appearance of human beings at first glance—meaning they apparently stood upright on two legs. However, there were marked differences. Ezekiel notices that each one had four faces, four wings and feet like calves that sparkled like bronze (seeming to indicate hooves).

Concerning the faces, Ezekiel tells us that each had the face of a man, of a lion on the right side, of an ox on the left side, and of an eagle. The human face was evidently facing Ezekiel and the eagle face was behind. This does not mean the human face was the primary one. For when the four faces are listed in Ezekiel 10, "the face of a cherub" is substituted for the ox face and called the "first face" (10:14). So why did the human faces look toward Ezekiel, while the ox or cherub faces looked to the left? The directions here are significant. Bear in mind that the throne and creatures were coming from the north. Ezekiel therefore viewed them from the south. So the south face of each was human. The west face of each was that of the ox or cherub, the north face of each was that of the eagle and the east face of each was that of the lion. Considering the traveling throne and cherubim together as a unit, the main face looking to the south from it was the south face of the south-positioned cherub—the human face. The main face looking to the west was the west face of the west-positioned cherub—the ox face. The main faces looking out from the vehicle on the north and east were the eagle and lion respectively.

As was mentioned in the Bible Reading Program comments on Numbers 2, this was the exact configuration of the Israelite camp in the wilderness, wherein the four primary tribal standards of Israel (the lion of Judah, the eagle of Dan, the bull of Ephraim, and the man representing Reuben) were positioned around the ancient tabernacle containing the Ark of the Covenant, itself a representation of God's throne. A similar vision of four living creatures surrounding God's throne was given to the apostle John in Revelation. However, the creatures there are not described as humanoid in appearance or as each having multiple faces. "And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were *four* living creatures.... The first living creature was like a *lion*, the second living creature like a *calf*, the third living creature had a *face like a man*, and the fourth living creature was like a *flying eagle*" (Revelation 4:6-7). The creatures could be the same—or the same in type. Perhaps these extra-dimensional beings look quite different when viewed from different angles. Or, as noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 6, perhaps they are capable of changing shape or manifesting themselves in different forms to human beings.

The creatures in the visions of Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 had six wings. These in Ezekiel's vision are described as having only four. But again, that could be due to shape shifting or viewing from a different angle or because the wings were engaged in different activities. Consider that Ezekiel saw a wheel over the ground beside each creature (Ezekiel 1:15). Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel or a wheel spinning inside a wheel—or, rather, "their workings" gave this appearance (verse 16). Perhaps the wheel beside each creature is the "missing" two wings in motion—similar to the effect produced by a hummingbird's wings. Note that Ezekiel describes the sound of the cherub wings not as the whooshing of slow flapping but as "the noise of many waters...a tumult like the noise of an army" (verse 24)—possibly like a modern helicopter. Ezekiel later says the wheels are called "whirling" (see *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown Commentary*, note on 10:13). Perhaps the wings whirled, creating the wheel effect. Isaiah 6:2 says that only two of the six seraphim wings were used for flying.

However, Ezekiel describes the wheels as having very high "rims" or "rings" that were full of eyes (Ezekiel 1:18). Perhaps these were indeed actual chariot wheels—the "eyes" being jewels. Or again, the "rims" could have been an effect produced by the fluttering wings. John too saw a multitude of eyes: "four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.... And the four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within" (Revelation 4:6, 8). If the eyes are associated with the wings, perhaps this is similar to peacock plumage—where what appear to be

eyes can be seen from either side (the wings of some butterflies and moth wings are also decorated with what appear to be eyes).

Ezekiel says that the entire throne-carrying system of these four creatures was guided by a “spirit” (verse 20). Wherever this spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them. He observes that “the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.” The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*, also translated “wind.” The source of the windstorm’s power was evidently the *wind* created by the wheels. Interestingly, Zechariah 5:9 describes wind as being in the *wings* of flying creatures. This gives us more reason to believe the wheels of Ezekiel’s vision to be wings. (Of course, as these are spirit beings, we should not conclude that wings and wind in the physical medium of air are an actual necessity for their ability to fly.)

Next, Ezekiel describes a “firmament” or platform of crystal stretched out over the heads of the cherubim, on which sat the sapphire-blue throne of God (Ezekiel 1:22, 26). Such a crystalline expanse is also described by John: “Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal” (Revelation 4:6). It was also seen by Moses and the elders of Israel, when they “saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself” (Exodus 24:10). Perhaps the sapphire throne was being reflected in the crystal floor beneath it.

In the crowning moment of the vision Ezekiel heard a voice from above the expanse over the heads of the cherubim as they stood with lowered wings. Above the great crystalline platform was the sapphire throne, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man—“a *likeness* with the appearance of a man” (verse 26). The Hebrew for “likeness” is, again, *dmuwth*. Man was made in the likeness of God (Genesis 1:26; 5:1)—to *look like* Him. (For further proof that God, though eternal spirit, has a body with a form and shape resembling that of human beings, send for or download our free booklet *Who Is God?*)

Ezekiel saw that from the waist up God’s appearance was like radiant gold and that from the waist down it was like fire; and brilliant light surrounded Him. Ezekiel later sees the same glorious form in vision in chapter 8. John described the glorified Jesus Christ similarly in Revelation 1:14-16: “His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace...His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.”

The magnificent brilliance surrounding God and His throne was His awesome, radiating *glory*, which appeared like a rainbow. John also saw the rainbow but pointed out that its predominant color was emerald green (Revelation 4:3). Ezekiel makes no such note. Perhaps it pulsed with various hues. In any event, the scene was spectacular—and humbling. Ezekiel fell facedown in reverence and awe, and the great God of the universe began to address him. God, as our next reading reveals, was here to call and commission Ezekiel the priest as His prophet.

### **Ezekiel’s Calling and Commission (Ezekiel 2–3)**

**August 14-15**

We read here of Ezekiel’s calling and commission. God begins by addressing Ezekiel as “son of man.” This title is used to refer to Ezekiel almost 100 times in the book. The only other uses of the title in the Old Testament occur in the book of Daniel—when the archangel Gabriel addresses Daniel and also to refer to Christ (8:17; 7:13). The original Hebrew expression in these instances is *ben adam*—which means “son of Adam.” The idea is that of a person representative of the human race. Remember that Ezekiel is a priest—a human representative who serves as an intermediary between God and man. A prophet likewise serves as such a representative.

“Son of Man” is used of Jesus Christ in the New Testament 88 times, almost all of these occurrences being references He made to Himself. Jesus also served and serves as a priest—our High Priest, in fact (Hebrews 2:17; 3:1)—and prophet (Acts 3:22, 26) and, in many ways, as a representative of humanity. Yet in Jesus’ case, the definite article “the” precedes the phrase. Used alone, “son of man” refers to a descendent of Adam. When used with the definite article it means a specific, looked-for representative—the long-awaited Messiah—who, as “the Second Man” or “Last Adam,” takes the place of the first Adam. Paul uses this terminology in 1 Corinthians 15.

God commands Ezekiel to stand (Ezekiel 2:1). Then Ezekiel has a transforming experience—God’s Spirit enters him and is the agency that sets him on his feet (verse 2). This is no doubt spiritually significant. To stand before God is essentially a metaphor for *taking* a stand *for* God. God commands Ezekiel to do so—and then empowers him to do so through the Holy Spirit. As mentioned in the previous Bible Reading Program comments, it is interesting to consider that the giving of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament on the Day of Pentecost was accompanied by the

sound of rushing wind and the appearance of fire (Acts 2)—particularly when we learn that this section of Ezekiel was read by the Jews of Christ's day on Pentecost.

God then gives Ezekiel his new job description. He is being sent to people who are not so keen to obey God's voice. The Israelites are a rebellious people. Actually, all people who do not yet have God's Spirit are rebellious by nature (Romans 8:7), but it seems that Israelites generally are more independent and self-willed than many gentile nations (see Ezekiel 3:6-7). Yet Ezekiel is told to give them God's warning message even if they refuse to listen. When the prophecies come true they will know that a prophet of God has been among them—a recurring theme in the book of Ezekiel. Indeed, this would be a witness to them—to deny them the excuse that they were never warned yet also to provide them with a context for later coming to understanding their predicament and perhaps repenting then.

Ezekiel is told to be courageous. During the time of his ministry, he is to expect torment as if from briars and thorns and as if living among scorpions, so great would the animosity against him be. Jeremiah certainly experienced this in a major way. And this brings to mind the words of Jesus just after His final Passover with His disciples. He said His servants should expect to be rejected by men (John 15:18-20). Indeed, as we have seen from the examples of other men of God, the lives of those who have proclaimed God's message have never been easy.

God then utters a surprising warning to Ezekiel: "Do not be rebellious like that rebellious house" (verse 8). Even though Ezekiel was God's inspired servant with God's Spirit, this was still a possibility. After all, he was human like the rest of his people and had been immersed in their culture, with its outlook and attitudes, since childhood. Though now strengthened by God, there was a real danger that Ezekiel could be pulled back into their carnal ways—especially if he gave in to defeat in the face of the hostility and persecution he was going to experience. This should serve as a warning to all Christians today to not be overcome by the pressures of society or by its evil enticements and thereby sink into sin and rebellion against God.

In contrast to rebellion, God tells Ezekiel in the same verse, "Open your mouth and eat what I give you." This signifies being *receptive* to God. Ezekiel sees a hand stretched out to him with a scroll—no doubt of the ancient kind, written on skins sewed together to make a long piece, which was then rolled up from an end. The writing was usually on one side, but in this case it was on both sides—as if running over—to express the abundance of the lamentations, mourning and woes with which the scroll was filled.

Ezekiel is instructed to eat the scroll, which he does (3:1-2). However, remember that the account is still that of a *vision* (1:1). The eating of the scroll did not actually happen except in Ezekiel's mind. What did it mean? Recall Jeremiah's account of *his* calling: "Then the LORD put forth His hand [similar to what Ezekiel saw] and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: 'Behold, I have put *My words* in your mouth'" (Jeremiah 1:9). So in Ezekiel 2-3, the scroll with writing represented God's message that Ezekiel was to proclaim. Eating the words means the prophet accepts them and internalizes them. We see the sentiment repeated in verse 10: "Son of man, receive into your heart all My words that I speak to you, and hear with your ears." Here, receiving into the heart replaces receiving into the stomach. It is interesting to note that Holy Scripture, the "word of righteousness," is referred to as food in the New Testament (compare Hebrews 5:13-14; Matthew 4:4). Even today, we still employ the metaphor of "digesting" information.

The words to Ezekiel are, in his mouth, as sweet as honey (Ezekiel 3:3). Yet he is soon in "bitterness" (verse 14). Very similar imagery is presented to us in the book of Revelation, when John is told to take a little "book" from an angel: "I went to the angel and said to him, 'Give me the little book.' And he said to me, 'Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.' Then I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter" (Revelation 10:9-10). In both cases, this seems to express the joy and wonder of initially coming to understand prophecy—followed by the great heartache that sets in when considering the terrible judgments people are going to have to suffer and the abominable sins that have necessitated such punishment (and perhaps anguish over the fact that the message will provoke great hostility and derision).

Ezekiel is commanded, "Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them" (Ezekiel 3:1). This certainly meant the people of Judah in Ezekiel's immediate context, as they are the people to whom he actually proclaimed his message (that is, to a percentage of those in Babylonian exile). But, as we will see in going through his book, many of Ezekiel's prophecies were intended for all of Israel—that is, the northern 10 tribes as well, who had gone into captivity about 130 years earlier. So Ezekiel's commission must be understood in a broader context. He was to "go"

to the rest of the house of Israel in a metaphoric sense by sending them a message—His book. He would not personally deliver the message to these recipients. Instead, others would later bear the responsibility of getting the word to them. Jesus Christ sent His disciples to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6). And His disciples today still have that duty.

God informs Ezekiel that even though he speaks the same language as his audience, he should not expect a great response to his warnings. God states that the pagan gentiles who have never known Him would be more likely to listen. Jesus stated essentially the same thing, telling Jewish cities of His day: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes...And you, Capernaum...if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.... The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Matthew 11:21-23; 12:41).

God states that the house of Israel would not listen to Ezekiel because they would not listen to *Him*, as when God told Samuel, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). Yet God encourages Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 2:6, He had told His servant not to be dismayed by the looks of the people. Now God says He will make Ezekiel’s face stronger than theirs: With great intensity and determined will (the rock-hard forehead), he would be able to face them down (3:8-9). God had similarly told Jeremiah, “Do not be dismayed before their faces.... For behold, I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land” (Jeremiah 1:17-18). These are encouraging words for all who preach God’s truth to others, since we learn to rely on His strength instead of our own. God helps us to be properly “thick-skinned,” being more concerned about His will than the judgments of other people.

Ezekiel is then specifically instructed to go and preach God’s message to the Jewish captives in Babylonia (Ezekiel 3:11). In verses 12-13 we are reminded that all the while, this blazing vision of God’s glorious throne has been ongoing. The great “rushing wind” sound of the cherubim’s wings is again heard. Ezekiel himself is “lifted up” and transported (verses 12, 14). This is evidently still part of the vision, for in verse 15 we find him among those he started out with as the book opened (see 1:1).

The exact location of Tel Abib, or Tel Aviv (not to be confused with the modern Tel Aviv, Israel), is not known—though it is said to be on the River Chebar, which, as noted in the previous Bible Reading Program comments, was evidently a canal adjoining the Euphrates southeast of Babylon.

Ezekiel sits astonished with the captives for seven days. His preaching is not yet started. Rather, he now has to try and assimilate all that God has told him he will be responsible for proclaiming. Interestingly, priests were required to take seven days to be consecrated for their office (Leviticus 8:33). And it is at the end of the seven-day period that God actually places Ezekiel in the position of watchman.

“A watchman in O[ld] T[estament] times stood on the wall of the city as a sentry, watching for any threat to the city from without or within. If he saw an invading army on the horizon, or dangers within the city like fire or riots, the watchman would immediately sound the alarm to warn the people” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 3:16-17). If a watchman failed to do his job and people suffered as a result, that watchman was held accountable. God informs Ezekiel that the only way for him to save himself is to relay God’s message—whether or not anyone responds to it. God tells Ezekiel that he will be held accountable for the evil that people do if he doesn’t warn them of the consequences.

Isaiah recorded how watchmen of Israel have not done their job. Isaiah 56:10-12 states: “Israel’s watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep. They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain. ‘Come,’ each one cries, ‘let me get wine! Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today, or even far better’” (NIV).

Again, “the hand of the LORD was upon” Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:22). As God instructs, he goes out to the plain—“the wide open plain common in the heart of Babylonia” (*Expositor’s*, footnote on Ezekiel 3:22)—and sees, again in vision, the glorious picture of God’s throne he recorded in chapter 1 (3:23).

Ezekiel is then told to go into his house. He is to live as if under house arrest and must remain in his house unless he is giving a special message from God. In many cases he is to pantomime or act out

what is going to happen. There are 25 pantomimes of Ezekiel recorded for us in this book, many of which were stressful and self-sacrificing to carry out. Staying in his house is the first one. God established when Ezekiel would prophesy. Ezekiel was to remain in his house, except when God required him to go outside to dramatize His messages. The fact that he is to remain mute is a restriction against public speaking. It probably doesn't mean that he could never speak in private. This condition of being restrained from speaking publicly would last for almost seven and a half years—until the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (33:21-22). However, as we will see, there were several times during this period that God directed him to speak.

### **The Siege of Jerusalem—A Sign to Both Israel and Judah (Ezekiel 4) August 16-17**

In this second pantomime instructed by God, Ezekiel is directed to act out a mock siege against Jerusalem. Recall that he was to effectively be mute, so the prophet's strange actions would communicate God's message. This was to be a sign to the people of Judah living in captivity. No doubt word of what Ezekiel was doing spread throughout the colony and perhaps even to those in faraway Jerusalem.

The prophet is instructed to draw a diagram of the city on a clay tablet and then represent its siege by an attacking army through building miniature earthen siege works around it (Ezekiel 4:1-2). He is also to set up an iron pan between himself and the city as a wall (verse 3). Some commentators have viewed this as depicting a siege wall, but it is *in addition* to the miniature siege wall of verse 2. Other commentators understand it as a barrier signifying God separating Himself from Jerusalem and no longer protecting it—or even as His “iron-willed” determination to destroy the city. Indeed, Ezekiel is to have his arms uncovered—the image of a man with rolled up sleeves, ready to fight—as God is described in Isaiah 52:10.

The mock siege is given as a “sign to the house of Israel” (verse 3), which is rather interesting. The next verses clearly delineate between the house of Israel (the people of the northern kingdom) and the house of Judah (those of the southern kingdom). Jerusalem, as the ancient capital of all 12 tribes, is used here to represent the nations of both Israel and Judah. The sins of both are what bring about this siege.

As part of the symbolism, Ezekiel is told to lie on one side for 390 days, figuratively bearing the iniquity of the house of Israel, and then for 40 days on the other side, bearing Judah's iniquity (verses 4-6). Based on verse 9, which says that Ezekiel's time of lying on his side was 390 days, some construe the 40 days as being part of the 390. But this goes against the clear sense of verse 6. Verse 9 simply concerns the number of days of the mock siege in which he is required to eat certain food—the 390 and not the 40.

Each day of lying down is said to represent a year (verse 6). This brings to mind Numbers 14:34, where God imposed on Israel the punishment of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness for the 40 days of the mission of those who spied out the Promised Land and returned with an evil report. Interestingly, too, the figures of 390 and 40 add up to 430 years, a significant time span in Israel's history—this being the length of time from God's covenant with Abraham to the Exodus (see Exodus 12:41; Galatians 3:17).

The meaning of the 390 and 40 years is not entirely clear. There are numerous difficulties here. For instance, we aren't told when the count of years begins or ends in either case. And it is not clear whether we should count backwards or forwards. Notice verse 5 in the New King James Version: “For I have laid on you the years of their iniquity.” This seems to imply a count backwards of 390 years of past sin, which strangely—if we started with the time this prophecy was given in 593 B.C.—would land us late in the reign of King David. Or, if we counted back from the northern kingdom's fall at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 B.C., this would place the start of the 390 years in the period of the judges.

But perhaps “years of their iniquity” is meant to imply years *due to* their iniquity—that is, years of consequences their iniquity has brought about. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* states in a footnote on verse 4, “The term 'aon (*awon*, 'sin') has three basic meanings (1) 'iniquity,' (2) 'guilt of iniquity,' (3) 'the punishment for iniquity.' Here the context reflects the second meaning...though the third meaning can be equally argued.” Indeed, in place of the word iniquity, the Tanakh and NRSV have “punishment.” This changes the meaning entirely, as it would indicate that the 390 years are a period not of past sin but of coming judgment; the count would be forward and not backward.

Counting 390 years forward from the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. interestingly brings us to 332 B.C., the year that Alexander the Great defeated the Persian forces of Darius III at the Battle of Issus. It has been suggested the northern tribes were basically confined through the

remainder of the Assyrian Empire, the entire Babylonian Empire and the duration of the Medo-Persian Empire, finally gaining their freedom with the overthrow of the Persians by Alexander. Perhaps that is so for any Israelites who had remained in the vicinity of northern Assyria. However, it should be mentioned that the Israelite Scythians helped to defeat Assyria and that many of them had migrated away to freedom even before. Certainly a great multitude became free with the onset of the Babylonian period, though a significant number of them were later made to submit to Persian rule. Still, it was the Scythian Massagetae (most likely Israelites), ranging free on the Asian steppes west of the Caspian Sea, who killed the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great when he tried to conquer them. It should also be mentioned that there were still Israelites dwelling under the dominion of Alexander and then of his successors, the Seleucids. These would gain their independence the next century as the Parthians.

As for the 40 years for Judah, this too is uncertain. Some scholars contend that it should be counted backwards, understanding the period to extend from the time of the renewal of the covenant by Josiah in 622 B.C. until the year 582 B.C., which was the time that the remainder of the Jews were transported to Babylon (see Jeremiah 52:30). But why would a period of sin be counted from the renewal of the covenant? Some view the 40 years as the period of terrible sin during the Jewish king Manasseh's reign prior to his repentance—the time of Judah's greatest evil, for which God proclaimed destruction on the nation and its capital (2 Kings 21:10-15; 23:26-27). On the other hand, counting forward—viewing the 40 years as a period of coming judgment—it is conceivable that the time intended is that from the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. to 546 B.C., the year Cyrus the Great secured the western Persian Empire through the conquest of Lydia, effectively making him more powerful than the Babylonians. He returned east the same year. Over the next seven years, he would encroach on Babylonian territory, finally invading Babylon in 539 B.C.

And there are yet other possibilities. A number of scholars point out that Ezekiel's prophecy is dated from the captivity of Jeconiah in 597 B.C. and argue that this should be the starting point for counting forward—noting also that the full 430 years should be counted, thus ending with 167 B.C., the time of the Jewish Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Greeks. Counting from the time the prophetic message was portrayed, 593 B.C., would bring us to 164-163 B.C., when the Maccabean revolt had proven successful. Counting 390 years forward from 593 would bring us to 203-202, the time the Parthians were gaining independence from the Seleucids (and then it is 40 years beyond *that* that brings us to *Judah's* push for independence from the Seleucids). Consider, in this light, that the Seleucids were essentially the successors of Assyria and Babylon—and that the years would, in this case, signify the times of emergence from their oppression (as the 430 years in Exodus marked the end of oppression and slavery).

Of course, this is all assuming that the years in question refer to ancient history. Perhaps they have some end-time application. Consider the siege Ezekiel portrays. It is against Jerusalem, and yet it is a sign to both Israel and Judah. Surely this was not meant to be understood in Ezekiel's day, as the northern tribes did not then get the message. Moreover, the siege Ezekiel conducts lasts 430 days, about a year and two months. But the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in ancient times lasted for around two and a half years.

In Ezekiel 4:8, God says he would restrain (literally, "place ropes on") the prophet to make him unable to turn and switch sides during the acting out of the siege. How, then, was Ezekiel able to cook his food—as we next see him instructed—while lying down? The situation was the same as that with Ezekiel's muteness. He wasn't required to be on his side 24 hours a day. He prepared meals and, as we see in chapter 8, he was sitting in his house less than a year and two months later—apparently while the mock siege was still going on (compare 1:1-2; 3:15-16; 8:1). The wording in Ezekiel 4:8 simply means that whenever he lay down, God made sure he was only on the correct side for the specified group of days.

God then tells Ezekiel what he is to eat for the next 390 days—a mixed-grain bread (verse 9). God first told him to bake it in a defiled way, cooking it over dried human waste, in order to symbolize the defiled state of Israel and Judah (verses 12-14). But after Ezekiel expressed his revulsion at this, God allowed him to instead cook the food over cow manure, "a common fuel then as now" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 12-15). The issue of defilement, it should be noted, was strictly over the matter of using human waste (see Deuteronomy 23:12-14), not from mixing grains as some have supposed (as the proscription against mixing grains forbade the crossbreeding of plants, not the cooking of them together). Centuries later the apostle Peter felt the same revulsion toward eating unclean animals, refusing when he was told to kill and eat them in a vision (Acts 10:14).

Some have argued that Ezekiel 4:9 provides the recipe for bread that is ideal for sustaining us—as it sustained Ezekiel for more than a year. (You can even buy “Ezekiel 4:9 bread” in some health food stores.) But that is not the point of the verse in its context at all. What we see is that Ezekiel’s food was to be “by weight” (verse 10), to symbolize rationing during the time of siege, as the explanation in verses 16-17 makes clear (compare 5:16-17; Leviticus 26:26). “The recipe of six mixed grains for the bread indicates the limited and unusual food supply while in bondage in a foreign land. The small amounts of these grains [evidenced by the fact that they had to be thrown together in a mixture to produce a sufficient quantity of meal] vividly picture the short supply of food in a city under siege. Because a city under siege was cut off from outside supplies, the people had to ration their food and water. If it ran out, they would be forced to surrender. In Jerusalem, the people would be allowed daily only a half pound of bread (twenty shekels) and less than a quart of water (one-sixth of a hin)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Ezekiel 4:4-11).

Certainly the mixed-grain bread had some sustaining value, but this was far from a balanced diet. If one is going to claim that this is meant to portray ideal food, the same would have to be said for cooking over dung—and that just does not follow. In fact, notice verses 16-17 in the NIV: “Son of man, I will cut off the supply of food in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair, for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin.” They would be aghast at the gaunt, emaciated appearance of one another. It is likely that Ezekiel’s diet produced the same effect in him: “The people watched and got the message. They watched with growing horror as Ezekiel weighed out his meagre measure of mixed grain and eked out his water ration. They saw the prophet wasting away, as the population of Jerusalem would do under siege” (*Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible*, note on chapters 4–5).

Again, however, it should be pointed out that this was a prophecy that concerned the future of both Judah and Israel. As such, it was evidently meant in a dual sense—applying in part to Jerusalem’s fall to ancient Babylon but also the fall of Judah *and* Israel to *end-time* Babylon, as the next chapters make even clearer.

### **One Third by Pestilence and Famine, One Third by Sword and One Third Into Captivity (Ezekiel 5)**

**August 18-19**

Chapter 5 continues with instructions about the mock siege. God tells Ezekiel to shave his head and beard. Shaving the head and beard was a sign of humiliation and disgrace (compare 7:18; 2 Samuel 10:4). For priests it was a mark of defilement, rendering them unfit for temple duties (Leviticus 21:5). Israel, God’s priestly nation, was going to be humiliated and defiled.

The cut hair was to be divided into three equal piles (Ezekiel 5:1-2). At the end of the mock siege, which would not come until more than a year later, the piles of hair were to be dispensed with in different ways. Ezekiel was to place one pile in the middle of the clay diagram and burn them (verse 2), symbolizing the third of the people who would die in the siege by pestilence and famine (verse 12). The next pile of hair—another third—was to be placed outside the perimeter wall and struck with a sword (verse 2), symbolizing those who would suffer violent death at the hands of enemy military forces (verse 12). And the last third was to be tossed into the air for the wind to carry away (verse 2), signifying that one third of the people would be taken captive by military forces and scattered (verse 12).

When and to whom would all of this happen? The destruction is commonly assumed to apply to ancient Jerusalem’s fall to the Babylonians in 586 B.C., and that is likely on one level. But, as stated in the comments on chapter 4, Ezekiel is portraying punishment to befall not just Jerusalem but all of Israel—that is, all 12 tribes (symbolized by Jerusalem, it being the ancient capital of all Israel). Notice the end of Ezekiel 5:4: “From there a fire will go out into all the house of Israel.” Indeed, this exactly parallels the next chapter, which is directed to “the mountains of Israel” (verse 3). Ezekiel is to proclaim: “Alas, for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” (verse 11). Yet the northern kingdom of Israel had *already* fallen—to the Assyrians 130 years earlier. So for this prophecy to make sense, it must refer to the future destruction of Israel—which, as other prophecies make clear, is to take place alongside Judah’s destruction at the end of the age.

For another parallel passage, notice Zechariah 13:8-9: “And it shall come to pass in all the land...that two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, but one-third shall be left in it: I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested.” Two thirds die, just as in Ezekiel’s prophecy. And the last third, though initially brought through the fire,

escaping death at first, is then sent through a great period of trial, which fits with the experience of national captivity and scattering. This prophecy of Zechariah was given long after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Indeed, it was given at the time of Judah's restoration after the Babylonian captivity. So it could not refer to that destruction. In fact, we know the time frame of the foretold destruction since, in the very next verse, the prophecy continues right into Zechariah 14, a message clearly concerning Christ's return at the end of the age. This destruction, then, happens just prior to that.

So again, this is something all Israel—Judah and Israel—will experience at the end of the age. The people of Judah today are the Jewish people. The descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel, on the other hand, primarily make up the nations of Northwest Europe and other nations of Northwest European heritage, including the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (request or download our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* to learn more). Imagine, then, the overwhelming magnitude of destruction that awaits these nations for their sins. If the Israelites today throughout these nations were estimated at around 300 million people, then 100 million would die through pestilence and famine—involving ghastly, desperate instances of cannibalism as the famine raged (Ezekiel 5:10; compare Leviticus 26:29; Deuteronomy 28:52-57). Another 100 million would die at the hands of enemy military forces, and the remaining 100 million would go into captivity.

These tolls are staggering. To make matters worse, recall the prophetic indications that only a tenth of the Israelites who go into captivity in the end time will survive (see Amos 5:3; Isaiah 6:11-13, Living Bible). Using the above numbers, this would mean that only 10 million would remain at Christ's return. These figures should serve as a frightful and dire warning to the people of modern Israel. The horrible terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were as nothing when measured against to what is yet to come (compare Deuteronomy 28:58-68).

While these warnings are graphic and threatening, there is still hope for repentance. Indeed, God always gives a warning with the hope that the disaster He is about to bring may be averted (see Jeremiah 18:5-8; Jonah 4:2, Joel 2:12-14). God does not rejoice in the punishment of the wicked—no matter how deserved it is (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11). He rejoices in repentance and obedience to the only way of life that is right and good—His way (Isaiah 48:17-18).

Interestingly, distinct from the three categories of national punishment, Ezekiel was to take a few strands of hair and tuck them safely away in the edge of his garment (Ezekiel 5:3). These hairs symbolized a special, select group. The Hebrew word translated “edge” is sometimes translated “wings,” as a marginal reference in the King James Version notes. To understand the symbolism, compare Psalm 91:1, 4: “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty...under His *wings* you shall take refuge.” The meaning, then, is evidently one of divine protection. However, even some of those who are in this special group are to be burned up.

In Ezekiel's time, the protected group could perhaps indicate the initial captives who were resettled in Babylon—who experienced a measure of peace (compare Jeremiah 29:4-7). Indeed, these constituted Ezekiel's immediate audience. They did not have to experience the worst of the horrible destruction on Judah, in which Jerusalem and the temple were sacked and razed. Yet among these, some stubbornly persisted in wickedness and were killed as a result (compare verses 21-23). This, then, would have served as a stark warning to those who witnessed Ezekiel's prophetic actions.

What, then, of the end-time context? Regarding the last days, Jesus Christ gave His servants, true Christians, these instructions: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). He later gave this message to His faithful followers of the end time: “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world [the Great Tribulation], to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

Yet another message shows that even some Christians will have drifted far from God and will require severe circumstances to shake them up and cause them to repent: “So, then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.... I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire [evidently the fire of the Great Tribulation]... As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (verses 16-19).

In Revelation 12, a “woman,” representing the Church of God, is taken to a place of protection from Satan the dragon (verses 13-16). But Satan then goes in pursuit of the “rest of her offspring” who, though they keep God's commandments and testimony, are evidently not as faithful as they need to be at that time and therefore are not with the others in the place of protection (verse 17).

(Of course, this is a very general breakdown. There may well be some faithful individuals who don't go to a place of safety but are instead martyred, just as most of the original apostles and many Christians of later periods were.)

Thus it appears that those bound in the hem of the garment are meant, in an end-time context, to represent members of God's true Church. Yet there are at least two ways of understanding this. One is that the collection of hairs initially bound in the hem symbolizes all Church members alive at the end time. Of these, some remain protected (those taken to a place of safety) and some are cast into the fire of the Great Tribulation (never going to the place of safety). The other possible way of looking at it is that the hairs initially bound in the hem represent those Church members who are taken to a place of safety in the end time. Of these, some remain protected in the place of safety and some are cast into the fire—losing that protection for some reason. The former seems more likely as the latter does not take into account those true Christians who do not go to the place of safety at all.

Of course, the major focus of Ezekiel 5 is the terrible calamity that comes on Israel as a whole—each third experiencing a distinct punishment as we've seen. The ancient fall of Jerusalem would be a shocking lesson to all the nations—as the future fall of all Israel will be to a much greater degree (verse 15). Let it be a lesson to us *before* the fact. We must take warning now—for any one of us could yet be part of one of the three dreadful categories presented here. Let us be alert and pray regularly as Christ instructed in Luke 21:36, so that we may be counted worthy to escape what is coming—and to remain sheltered under the wings of the Almighty. Indeed, in our prayers we should specifically *ask* for His protection, as many biblical examples illustrate. Yet let us pray this for the right reasons. Jesus taught that preserving our physical lives should not be the reason for seeking protection. We must be willing to give up our lives for our convictions if need be (Matthew 16:25). We seek protection so that we may continue to serve God and care for others—and to continue growing in the kind of character God desires of us. Our ultimate goal is eternal life in His Kingdom. That is the only lasting and impregnable security.

### **“In All Your Dwelling Places the Cities Shall Be Laid Waste” (Ezekiel 6) August 20-21**

At this point we have the first instance of God temporarily removing Ezekiel's muteness during the mock siege representing punishment on Israel and Judah. That it was still ongoing here is clear from the fact that Ezekiel 8:1 is dated to 13 months past the siege beginning (so the 430 days are still not over even then). The prophecy of chapter 6 is given during the 390 days symbolizing the punishment on the northern tribes of Israel. That's fitting, for the prophet is now to set his face “towards the mountains of Israel” (verses 2-3) and speak against them.

In ancient times, the literal mountains of Israel would have been the hills of Samaria, to the north of Jerusalem. Yet the Israelites were no longer settled there. They had been carried captive by the Assyrians around 130 years before Ezekiel's prophetic ministry began. And they weren't at this time anywhere close to Ezekiel. Rather, the Israelites were hundreds of miles to the northwest and northeast of him. It is therefore evident that they wouldn't have gotten his message—not then anyway. And there was no need for them to. There was no imminent threat to the existence of the kingdom of Israel at that time, as it had *already* been destroyed long before. And the scattered peoples of the northern tribes were not in mortal danger either. Ancient Judah's destruction was certainly imminent, but why would that have been a danger to the northern tribes?

Some try to solve this problem by arguing that “mountains of Israel” and “house of Israel” in this chapter refer exclusively to Judah. But the whole context of the mock siege is that it is to represent a punishment on the house of Israel *and* the house of Judah—clearly delineating between the two (4:4-6). Putting all of this together, it should be clear that Ezekiel 6 is a prophecy of the future destruction of the northern tribes of Israel in the end time. (In fact, all of chapters 3-7 can be similarly understood, realizing there is probably a measure of multiple fulfillments, involving the ancient destruction of Jerusalem and some historical periods of oppression endured by the Jews and Israelites.)

Figuratively, mountains are many times used in prophecy to symbolize nations. And it is indeed likely that the prophecy is directed to the numerous nations that now make up modern Israel—chief among them being those descended from Joseph—principally Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Of course, other features of the land are also addressed by the prophecy. Verse 3 mentions mountains, hills, ravines and valleys. Some maintain that these are simply cited as locations for pagan worship, as idolatrous shrines were everywhere throughout ancient Israel. That could well be, as these are all told that their places of worship will be destroyed. Recall that God had instructed the Israelites to destroy all the places where the pagans worshiped their idols: “upon the

high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree” (Deuteronomy 12:2; compare Ezekiel 6:13). The lower valleys were where the streams ran and the green trees were located.

However, these natural features are also told that their cities will be destroyed, which makes little sense for a ravine. Considering that mountains symbolize nations, the other features could be symbolic as well. Hills might mean smaller nations (compare Isaiah 2:2). Ravines and valleys in this usage could perhaps signify Israelite populations in countries where they are not the majority and not in power (such as the English colonial descendants in Zimbabwe and South Africa). They too will suffer God’s coming judgment.

Idolatry is the chief sin listed. The Hebrew word the book of Ezekiel uses most often for “idol,” as in 6:4, is *gillul*, a term derived from *gel*, meaning “dung pellets,” showing how detestable and disgusting they are to God (the same word was used in Jeremiah 50:2, as noted in the Bible Reading Program). In an end-time context, there is no question that idolatry remains Israel’s biggest sin—whether actual false worship, which is rampant throughout the nations of modern Israel, or the *spirit* of idolatry, exalting other pursuits or concerns above the true God. Even green trees are still significant as part of modern Christmas customs.

Ezekiel 6:6 tells us, “In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste.” Consider the destruction that befell Judah under Nebuchadnezzar: “Conditions in Judah must have been severe, for many Judean cities suffered during the Babylonian invasions. Arad, Lachish, Ramat Rahel, En-gedi, Timnah, Ekron, and Jerusalem are among the excavated sites showing evidence of destruction at this time. Only the region north of Jerusalem appears to have escaped relatively unscathed” (*Holman Bible Atlas*, 1998, p. 159). This utterly pales in comparison to what Ezekiel 6:6, an end-time prophecy, is actually saying.

What we are apparently being told here is that New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Toronto, London, Glasgow, Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland will be “laid waste”—obliterated. Paris, Geneva, Amsterdam, Oslo and Copenhagen may be wiped out as well. Perhaps we can now see how there could be such a huge death toll as that described in chapter 5. This appears to require the work of nuclear weapons or some other new superweapons—perhaps in conjunction with a bombardment of large meteors, earthquakes and other cataclysmic natural disasters from God (compare Leviticus 26:31-32; Deuteronomy 28:24). The prophesied destruction is utterly horrific and unimaginable. But, barring unexpected national repentance, it is going to happen—because of Israel’s sins. The rest of Ezekiel 6:6 tells us that this will serve to rid the land of its places of idolatrous worship (again, compare Leviticus 26:31).

We then see that people will come to realize that they have not been following the true God, as they will finally come to recognize Him for who He is (verses 7, 10, 13, 14). This will be the starting point for those who are left. Led away and scattered, many will finally come to loathe themselves because of their sins (verse 9)—the first steps on the road to repentance. He tells them to pound their fists and stamp their feet in a demonstration of grief and mourning while they lamented their national abominations (verse 11). If they had felt this way ahead of time, they would have been protected, as we later see in Ezekiel 9:4-6.

Through the proliferation of copies of the Bible, the modern nations of Israel now have ready access to this warning message Ezekiel proclaimed. Yet the vast majority of them still have no idea that they are the intended recipients of the message. We should all pray that the Israelite identity of the nations of Northwest European heritage becomes much more widely known as we approach the cataclysmic events that will shake the world at the end of this age.

### **“The End Has Come” (Ezekiel 7)**

**August 22-23**

Chapter 7 is a continuation of the prophetic message we’ve been reading, emphasizing the point that because the people have refused to come to know God through seeking and following His will, they will come to know Him in a different way—through His severe judgment (7:4, 9, 27). God’s warning here to the “land of Israel” (verse 2) was likely given during the 390 days of mock siege that represented the punishment on the northern 10 tribes (compare 1:1-2; 4:5; 8:1). Since the ancient fall of Israel happened long before Ezekiel wrote, his warning in this chapter is of Israel’s destruction in the end time—indeed, the time leading into “the day of the wrath of the LORD” (7:19). Of course, as with the other prophecies of this section, there was some application to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in Ezekiel’s own day. But, again, the message is mainly for Israel at the end of this age.

The term “four corners of the land” (verse 2) conveys the total destruction God will bring. This is not a partial or regional calamity. Ezekiel, as God’s watchman, is required to thunder this warning

loud and clear, even though his immediate audience was in captivity in Babylon. Accounts of what he said may well have been passed on to those Jews living in Jerusalem. And through the transmission of the sacred text across the centuries, we have his warnings today.

God explains that the Israelites are guilty of “abominations” (verses 3-4, 8-9)—terrible, loathsome sins—even in their religion, which is idolatrous (verse 20). The abominable practices are so bad that God declares He will not spare or have pity in the time of punishment—the severity of punishment conveying the severity of wrongdoing. Verse 9 introduces a terrifying new name for God in this context of punishment: *YHWH makkeh*, “The Eternal who strikes the blow.”

The ominous sense of impending doom is palpable. “Numerous short sentences and the repetition of words and phrases express the intensity of the message. The recurrence of the word ‘end’ [five] times in the first six verses stresses the finality of the judgment (cf. Amos 8:2). Judgment had come! Imminency was heightened by the reiteration of the verb ‘coming’ (seven times in [Ezekiel 7] vv. 5-12); the repetition of ‘now’ (vv. 3, 8 {NIV, ‘about to’}); and the use of terms like ‘time,’ ‘day,’ and ‘is near’ (v. 7)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-4).

Notice the rendering of this passage in the New Living Translation: “Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to Israel: The end is here! Wherever you look—east, west, north, or south—your land is finished. No hope remains, for I will unleash my anger against you. I will call you to account for all your disgusting behavior. I will turn my eyes away and show no pity, repaying you in full for all your evil.... With one blow after another I will bring total disaster! The end has come! It has finally arrived! Your final doom is waiting! O people of Israel, the day of your destruction is dawning.... Soon I will pour out my fury to complete your punishment for all your disgusting behavior. I will neither spare nor pity you. I will repay you for all your detestable practices.... None of these proud and wicked people will survive. All their wealth will be swept away. Yes, the time has come; the day is here!” (verses 2-12).

Verse 10 appears to be saying, “The rod [of punishment] has blossomed [because] pride has budded [among God’s people].” That is, the people are ripe for judgment since their arrogance has reached its zenith. Verse 11 may be saying that violence among God’s people has produced the consequence of a “rod of wickedness”—that is, a rod *necessitated by* wickedness, a rod *for dealing with* wickedness. Alternatively, the verse may mean that “the violent *one*” (NIV)—that is, the enemy of God’s people—has risen up as a punishing rod (meaning either Babylon or, in an ultimate sense, Satan).

Verses 12-13 seem to imply that people in difficult financial circumstances will be forced to sell property at low prices, but that in the end this will be irrelevant. The New Living Translation adds clarity: “There is no reason for buyers to rejoice over the bargains they find or for sellers to grieve over their losses, for all of them will fall under my terrible anger. And if any merchants should survive, they will never return to their business. For what God has said applies to everyone—it will not be changed! Not one person whose life is twisted by sin will recover.”

The message continues with a reminder of the three-fold punishment coming from God: sword, famine and pestilence (verse 15). When the warning sounds, people will be too weak or too afraid to fight (verses 14, 17). The initial survivors will be like birds driven from their roosts, separated from their kind, making mournful noises like the dove. These people are described as clothed in sackcloth and shaved bald, symbols of humiliation and shame in Middle Eastern cultures to this day (verses 16-18). In the bleak despair of the Great Tribulation, as the Day of the Lord approaches, they will finally come to view their money, which they had practically worshiped before, as worthless, unable to truly provide them with what they need, and they will toss it away (verse 19).

God says: “They were proud of their gold jewelry and used it to make vile and detestable idols [as they do even still]. That is why I will make all their wealth disgusting to them. I will give it as plunder to foreigners from the most wicked of nations, and they will defile it. I will hide my eyes as these robbers invade my treasured land and corrupt it” (verses 20-22, NLT). Again, this happened to a degree when ancient Jerusalem was invaded and plundered by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. It happened again when the Romans, imperial successors to the Babylonians, invaded Jerusalem in apostolic times. It will happen on the greatest scale, as primarily foretold in these verses, when Israel and Judah are both invaded and destroyed by the end-time revival of Rome and Babylon.

Finally, God orders that a *chain* be prepared (verse 23). Chains were used for binding criminals or enemy prisoners. Indeed, the surviving Israelites will be bound in chains and led away into slavery—just as the Jews experienced when Nebuchadnezzar’s forces invaded Judah and centuries later when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Recall also that the northern tribes were taken captive by the ancient Assyrians more than a century before Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry. And lest this seem only

the stuff of ancient history, we should remember Nazi Germany, in which multitudes of Jews were forced to toil in slave labor camps and vast numbers were led away to be exterminated. As horrifying as it is to contemplate, such days will come again, and are prophesied to be even worse.

People will turn to religious and civil leaders for help, but these will have no answers, not understanding the truth of God's Word (verse 26). They will have ignored the warnings prior to this. And now it will be too late. They will be judged according to what they deserve (verse 27). That would be a dire predicament for any of us. We all should deeply consider this and ask God to lead us to repent of our own sins now and receive God's merciful grace, before such judgment falls—and pray that others will recognize their own sins and repent as well. God's truth is available to us right now as we study His Word. Let's make good use of it.

### **Sunrise Services at the Temple (Ezekiel 8)**

**August 24-25**

Ezekiel 8–11 records the details of another powerful vision the prophet received from God. The date is a year and two months after the first vision (compare 1:1-2; 3:15-16; 8:1). This would seem to place it within the 40-day period during which Ezekiel lay on his right side to represent the punishment for Judah's sins—following the 390 days on his left side for Israel (compare 4:4-8). (However, it should be noted that, as sometimes happens with the Hebrew calendar, it is possible that a 13th month had been added to the year, which would mean that the vision of chapters 8–11 occurred just after the 40-day period.)

As chapter 8 opens, we find Ezekiel sitting in his house with the “elders of Judah” (leaders among the Jewish exiles in Babylon) in audience to hear what he has to say. No doubt his lengthy mock siege had attracted a great deal of attention.

Once again, Ezekiel experiences “virtual reality” by seeing and experiencing in his mind what the others in the room do not. He sees the same glorious figure he beheld in the first vision—that of the Lord (verse 2; compare 1:26-28), the preincarnate Jesus Christ (compare Revelation 1:12-15). The Lord carries the prophet, who is also a priest, in vision to Jerusalem, to the northern gate of the temple. The north gate was also called the “altar gate,” apparently because sacrifices were killed in its vicinity, on the north side of the altar (compare Leviticus 1:11; compare Ezekiel 40:35-43).

Ezekiel sees the glory of God (8:4)—the cascading illuminations surrounding God's presence—as he had witnessed in chapter 1. That glory was here at the temple, as were the four transporting cherubim, as we will see in the next few chapters. Yet, as we will also see, God's glory will soon depart from the sanctuary. Abominations committed here are causing Him to withdraw His presence.

Ezekiel is taken on a tour of the temple area to witness the terrible abominations. He first is told to look around where he has landed in this vision, in the vicinity of the north gate near the place of sacrifice—where a vile image is now located (perhaps implying that sacrifices are made to it).

The image is referred to as the “image of jealousy...which provokes to jealousy” (verse 3). This probably harkens back to God's commands against idolatry: “You shall not make yourself a carved image...[to] bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God... You shall destroy their [the Canaanites'] altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God)” (Exodus 20:4-5; 34:13-14). Israel is God's wife by covenant, and He is rightly jealous over her loyalty and affections—demanding that she not enter into adulterous relations with other gods, adopting their worship customs. Of course, being provoked to jealousy essentially means being provoked to justified anger, which may be why the Jewish Tanakh translation renders verse 3 as saying, “that was the site of the infuriating image that provokes fury.” The Revised English Bible has “where stands the idolatrous image which arouses God's indignation.”

There are different ideas as to what this image was. Some propose an image of Tammuz, the counterfeit savior of the Chaldean religion, since his worship is specifically mentioned in the chapter as occurring in the same place (Ezekiel 8:14). Surprisingly, the image could have been that of a large cross. As *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* explains, the modern cross “had its origin in ancient Chaldea, and was used as the symbol of the god Tammuz (being in the shape of the mystic Tau, the initial of his name) in that country and in adjacent lands, including Egypt. By the middle of the 3rd cent. A.D. the churches had either departed from, or had travestied, certain doctrines of the Christian faith. In order to increase the prestige of the apostate ecclesiastical system pagans were received into the churches apart from regeneration by faith, and were permitted to retain their pagan signs and symbols. Hence the Tau or T, in its most frequent form, with the cross-piece lowered, was adopted to stand for the ‘cross’ of Christ” (“Cross, Crucify,” New Testament Section, 1985).

Most scholars, however, feel the image was an *asherah*, the Hebrew term for a sacred wooden image or tree. The reason for this conclusion is because Manasseh “even set a carved image of Asherah that he had made” in the temple of God, and “he has acted more wickedly than all the Amorites who were before him, and has made Judah sin with his idols” (2 Kings 21:7, 11, NKJV). Even though Josiah purged Judah of idolatry during his reign, the hearts of the people reverted back to Manasseh’s evil after Josiah’s death—which means the priests may have been inclined to reproduce Manasseh’s image. Either way, since the corrupted Jewish worship was often syncretistic—blending true and false worship—it could well be that the idolatrous object, whatever its form may have been, was being used to worship the true God, which He had strictly forbidden.

Next, “Ezekiel was brought into the north entry gate. There he saw a hole in the wall and was told to dig through the wall, enter, and observe what the elders of Israel were doing secretly in the inner court [or, perhaps more accurately, in chambers or a particular chamber adjacent to the north gate] (vv. 7-9). These seventy elders were not the Sanhedrin of N[ew] T[estament] times. That institution had not yet begun. They were most likely the leaders of the nation who based their traditional position on Moses’ appointment of the seventy elders to assist him in governing God’s people (Exod 24:1, 9; Num 11:16-25)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 8:7-9).

Note that these are referred to as the “elders of the house of Israel” (verse 12). The expression “house of Israel” sometimes includes Judah—especially as Judah was supposed to be the faithful remnant of Israel. That Judah of Ezekiel’s day is intended is clear from the mention of Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, as Shaphan had been Josiah’s secretary of state and his other sons, such as Jeremiah’s friend Ahikam, came to occupy important positions (see 2 Kings 22:8-14; 2 Chronicles 34:15-21; Jeremiah 26:24; 29:3; 36:10; 40:5, 9, 11; 41:2; 43:6). Moreover, the phrase “house of Judah” is explicitly used in Ezekiel 8:17. Yet it may be that in this vision the 70 elders are also meant to typify, in a broader spiritual sense, the religious leadership of all Israel in a future context (particularly as we will later see other indications that the vision of chapters 8–11 applies to both Israel and Judah in the end time—see 9:9; 11:15, 17-21).

In verses 10-11 of chapter 8, Ezekiel describes the portrayal of idolatrous images on the walls where he has entered, with the elders—shockingly—standing before them as priests with censers. In verse 12, it appears that the honoring of idols is even done privately in the elders’ chambers—showing this to be their personal conviction. This seems fairly straightforward and yet the meaning may be broader. While pagan images may have literally been used to adorn the temple complex or its chambers in Ezekiel’s time, as they certainly did at earlier times, it is possible that the vision should be understood, at least on some level, in a figurative sense. Perhaps the indication is that the nation’s leaders, while practicing what appears to be a form of true worship, are really devoted to false gods and customs of false worship.

*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* states that the elders “are here the representatives of the people, rather than to be regarded literally. Mostly, the *leaders* of heathen superstitions laughed at them secretly, while publicly professing them in order to keep the people in subjection. Here what is meant is that the *people* generally addicted themselves to secret idolatry, led on by their elders; there is no doubt, also, allusion to the mysteries, as in the worship of Isis in Egypt, the Eleusinian [mysteries] in Greece, etc., to which the initiated were alone admitted” (note on verse 12).

Such a figurative meaning would apply in the nations of Israel and Judah even today—its leaders and people having rejected true worship for a false Christianity descended in many respects from the Babylonian mystery religion—called in Revelation 17 “Mystery, Babylon the Great.” Indeed, as God’s “temple” in New Testament times is His Church (see Ephesians 2:19-22; 2 Corinthians 6:16; compare Ezekiel 11:16)—the true “Israel” of God (Galatians 6:16)—Ezekiel’s vision here may even picture, in type, the great apostasy from the truth foretold by the apostle Paul (compare 2 Thessalonians 2:3).

The elders are pictured as saying, “The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land” (Ezekiel 8:12). When Ezekiel received this vision, Judah had experienced drought and a series of invasions—King Jeconiah and many people having been dragged away to Babylon. So, the leaders reasoned, God had deserted the land and the people—what did they have to lose! In the next chapter, these words are attributed to both Israel *and* Judah (9:9), so the same false reasoning will be employed in the future as national calamities begin to worsen. How ironic that such reasoning itself eventually leads to even greater calamity (verse 10). Also ironic is that the name of Jaazaniah, the person singled out, means “The Eternal Hears” or “The Eternal Harkens”—implying that God does indeed hear *and see* whatever is going on, and reacts.

Ezekiel is next directed to see the terrible abomination of women at the temple “weeping for Tammuz” (Ezekiel 8:14). The *Encyclopedia Mythica* says Tammuz was “the Akkadian vegetation-god, counterpart of the Sumerian Dumuzi and the symbol of death and rebirth in nature. He is the...husband of Ishtar. Each year he dies in the hot summer (in the month Tammuz, June/July) and his soul is taken by the Gallu demons to the underworld. Woe and desolation fall upon the earth [in the form of withering vegetation in autumn and winter], and Ishtar leads the world in lamentation [i.e., the weeping for Tammuz]. She then descends to the nether world...and after many trials succeeds in bringing him back, as a result of which fertility and joy return to the earth [in the spring]. In Syria he was identified with Adonis” (<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/t/tammuz.html>). As was explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 47, the myth of Ishtar and Tammuz may be traced back to the early Babylonian queen Semiramis, wife of Nimrod, the builder of Babel (see Genesis 10:8-10). After Nimrod’s death, Semiramis (Ishtar) produced a child through fornication (Tammuz) yet claimed that he was the very incarnation and resurrection of her dead husband, now reborn to life.

Recalling that the symbol for Tammuz was the cross, the idea of the women of Ezekiel’s vision weeping before his symbol (which may have been the image of jealousy mentioned earlier), mourning his death and awaiting his resurrection is disturbingly similar to some of what we see today that goes by the name of Christianity. Indeed, the ancient idea of a dying and resurrected saving god has led some to conclude that even the notions of Christ dying for our sins and being raised from the dead derived from paganism. Yet we should understand that though it was concocted by Semiramis, the worship of Tammuz—the fountainhead of the world’s idolatry—sprang from Satan, who deceives the whole world (Revelation 12:9). In his inimical deceit, Satan, through this ancient Babylonian religion, counterfeited certain aspects of the imagery of Christ’s later execution to subvert and pervert Christianity for some and utterly discredit it for others. On the subversion and perversion side, he has succeeded in convincing most of the world that many of the concepts and practices of his counterfeit religion belong in true Christian worship (for more details, request or download our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*).

It has been suggested by some scholars that the practice of “weeping for Tammuz” was the actual origin of Lent, the Roman Catholic 40-day period of abstinence prior to Easter (starting after Mardi Gras, “Fat Tuesday,” on Ash Wednesday). Consider that the name *Easter* itself is derived from *Ishtar*, the ancient Babylonian fertility goddess and Tammuz’s mother. Alexander Hislop, in his book *The Two Babylons*, explains that “the forty days abstinence of Lent was directly borrowed from the worshippers of the Babylonian goddess. Such a Lent of forty days, ‘in the spring of the year,’ is still observed by the Yezidis or Pagan Devil-worshippers of Koordistan, who have inherited it from their early masters, the Babylonians. Such a Lent of forty days was held in spring by the Pagan Mexicans... ‘Three days after the vernal equinox...began a solemn fast of forty days in honour of the sun.’ Such a Lent of forty days was observed in Egypt...Among the Pagans this Lent seems to have been an indispensable preliminary to the great annual festival in commemoration of the death and resurrection of Tammuz, which was celebrated by alternate weeping and rejoicing, and which, in many countries, was considerably later than the Christian festival, being observed in Palestine and Assyria in June, therefore called the ‘month of Tammuz’; in Egypt, about the middle of May, and in Britain, some time in April. To conciliate the Pagans to nominal Christianity, Rome, pursuing its usual policy, took measures to get the Christian and Pagan festivals amalgamated, and, by a complicated but skillful adjustment of the calendar, it was found no difficult matter, in general, to get Paganism and Christianity—now far sunk in idolatry—in this as in so many other things, to shake hands” (1959, pp. 104-105).

The month of Tammuz was the fourth month on the Hebrew calendar. Lent today overlaps the last month of the Hebrew year and ends in the first month. It is interesting to consider that the Celtic Britons, who centuries ago observed the mourning period more in line with the time Lent is observed today, were Israelites. Perhaps they had begun this practice while still in the Promised Land—as the apostate Jews may have also done. Either way, whether fourth month or first, we should notice that Ezekiel’s vision takes place in the *sixth* month (Ezekiel 8:1). Though that might appear problematic, this may just signify the time Ezekiel received the vision, not the time the events depicted in it actually occurred. Indeed, Ezekiel’s vision appears in many respects to be symbolic. Even if literal, we should not necessarily conclude that he was seeing things at the temple the very moment they were transpiring. His vision may have been more sweeping in scope, just as many other prophets had visions in a short time of events that would span days, months or even years in their actual fulfillment.

Ezekiel is then taken from the vicinity of the north gate to the court area outside of the Holy Place. He is here presented with another stunning sight—men with their backs to God’s temple “worshiping the sun toward the east” (verse 16). “The location for the sun worship was in the inner court...between the porch and the altar. These 25 men must have been Levites if temple regulations were being followed; otherwise, the area was forbidden (see Num. 3:7, 8; 18:1-7; 2 Chr. 4:9; Joel 2:17)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Ezekiel 8:15-16).

Indeed, this group appears distinct from the 70 image-worshipping elders mentioned previously. “It would seem strange that only a portion of the seventy would have been engaged in the sun worship. The specific numbers of seventy (v. 11) and twenty-five (v. 16) were probably given to aid in distinguishing the two groups. Therefore it is more likely that these twenty-five men were priests though one cannot be dogmatic about it. If they were priests perhaps the number is twenty-five because there was a representative of each of the twenty-four courses of the priests plus the high priest (cf. 1 Chron 23)” (*Expositor’s*, note on Ezekiel 8:16). Perhaps the symbolism is to demonstrate that both the civil and religious leadership were engaged in pagan practices—and maybe to show that the same would be true in the end time. (It should also be noted that chapter 11 mentions 25 “princes” giving wicked counsel, with another person named Jaazaniah among them—albeit a different Jaazaniah.)

In Ezekiel 8:16, since the sun was in the east, this logically denotes sunrise, a popular “in-between” moment for sun worship in the pagan world. Consider, as quoted above, “the solemn fast of forty days in honour of the sun.” Tammuz was often equated with Baal, and Baal often with the sun. Coming right on the heels of the previous verses, it could well be that what Ezekiel was witnessing was the conclusion of the pagan Lenten season, when Ishtar (or Easter) was deemed to have brought Tammuz (here as the incarnate sun) back from the underworld in a resurrection in the spring, specifically on the feast of Ishtar, known today as Easter. This, then, would have essentially been *Easter sunrise services*—so extremely popular today in the world religion that masquerades as Christianity and yet an utterly vile abomination according to God. Indeed, the symbolism is profound. The worshipers, religious leaders even, turned their backs on God in order to participate—and yet they probably claimed to be honoring the true God (as they still do). What audacity!

Rejection of true worship has resulted in *violence* throughout the land (Ezekiel 8:17)—*bloodshed*, the next chapter explains (9:9). As for “putting the branch to their nose” (verse 17), the meaning is uncertain. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* states: “...a proverbial expression denoting perhaps their scoffing at God and having him in derision; they snuffed at his service, as men do when they *put a branch to their nose*. Or it was some custom used by idolaters in honour of the idols they served. We read of garlands used in their idolatrous worships (Acts 14:13), out of which every zealot took a branch which they smelled to as a nosegay. Dr. Lightfoot (*Hor. Heb. in John* 15.6) gives another sense of this place: *They put the branch to their wrath, or to his wrath*, as the Masorites read it; that is, they are still bringing more fuel (such as the withered branches of the vine) to the fire of divine wrath, which they have already kindled, as if that wrath did not burn hot enough already. Or putting the branch to the nose may signify the giving of a very great affront and provocation either to God or man; they are an abusive generation of men” (note on verses 13-18).

God states that in the time of punishment He will not spare these leaders, even though they cry aloud for help. We must all reject false worship. Yet that is not the only point here. The lesson of this chapter becomes clearer when we examine the next chapters in this section. They show the glory of God departing from the temple because of such abominable practices and attitudes. God’s Spirit leaves when people turn away from Him. He remains only where He is welcome and is obeyed. This is true of nations, church organizations and individuals. And when He leaves, judgment follows.

### **A Mark on Those Who Sigh and Cry Over Abominations (Ezekiel 9) August 26-27**

The vision of the previous chapter continues. This chapter reveals some insight about God’s sparing of a remnant during a time of destruction. Notice that punishment is to come on “Israel *and* Judah” (verse 9). As the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen more than a century before Ezekiel wrote, this prophecy must be meant for the future destruction of Israel and Judah in the end time. As in chapters 4–7, Jerusalem is here used to represent all Israel, the city being the ancient capital of all 12 tribes. Of course, the prophecy no doubt had a limited application to the people of Judah in Ezekiel’s own day.

As the chapter opens, men who “have charge over the city” are summoned (verses 1-2). These are apparently angelic beings who were to render God’s judgment on the people of Jerusalem, again

representative of all Israel. Six arrive, each armed with a battle-ax. They stand beside the bronze altar, the altar of sacrifice, perhaps symbolizing that they will make a sacrifice of the disobedient nation (compare Isaiah 34:6; Zephaniah 1:7)—that blood would run as a result of the sins of the people.

With them is a man clothed in white linen who has a writer's kit containing a horn of ink at his side. In the Bible, one "clothed in linen" typically represents a holy servant of God (compare Daniel 10:5; Revelation 15:6).

In Ezekiel 8:3 the prophet again mentions the presence of the "glory of the God of Israel." It had "gone up from the cherub, where it had been, to the threshold [or entryway] of the temple"—on its way out altogether, as we will see in chapters 10–11. Putting this verse together with 10:3-4, it appears that the "cherub" in 8:3 and 10:4 indicates the inanimate copies of the cherubim whose wings covered the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. The transporting cherubim were waiting outside on the south side of the temple (10:3). The idea seems to be that God rises from His earthly throne in the Holy of Holies, ascends His transportable throne above the four living cherubim and then flies away. By withdrawing His presence God demonstrates His readiness to bring judgment on the people.

The writer with the horn is instructed to mark the foreheads of those who "sigh and cry" over the abominations and idolatry around them. The sighing here is not just a brief exhalation of disappointment. It is an utter groaning of spirit—deeply grieving and feeling anguish over what is happening. Jesus likewise said, "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4). This does not mean an absence of any joy and happiness in life. Rather, it means regular and heartfelt sober reflection on the state of the world.

Of course, those who are truly grieved at the sins are those who follow righteousness. That does not mean they are perfect, but they strive to do God's will. They mourn over their own sins as well as over those of the world around them. They groan over the pain and suffering human beings inflict on one another through their sins. They are indignant and outraged at injustice and blasphemy against God and His truth. They constantly cry out to God to intervene. These are the righteous—God's true servants—and God says He will spare them. He certainly protected such individuals in Ezekiel's day, but the primary focus here is on the future. This passage might well be read along with traditional references to a "place of safety" or God's protection at the end time (Zephaniah 2:3; Luke 21:36; Revelation 3:10; 12:14)—the object of such protection being those who are a part of God's true Church.

In the book of Revelation, the apostle John also saw visions of people being marked in their foreheads for protection. Notice: "Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads" (7:3). And: "They were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree, but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (9:3-4). Also: "Behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads" (14:1).

The first occasion in Scripture of a host of people being spared through some outward sign was the time of the Passover in Egypt, when lamb's blood was used to mark the dwellings of the Israelites who were spared from the slaughter of the death angel. The seal on those in the end-time is an inward one, the forehead representing the mind—wherein resides God's Holy Spirit, which signifies whether one is truly a Christian or not (see Romans 8:9).

The "death angels" in Ezekiel's vision are instructed to begin killing the people of Jerusalem—no doubt through the various punishments mentioned in Ezekiel 4–7. Of course, God doesn't command this slaughter until the people have been given sufficient warning to repent. But eventually it is time for the punishment to fall.

God says to begin with His sanctuary—the elders before the temple then being the actual starting point (9:5-6). This clearly harkens back to the abominations portrayed in the previous chapter.

The place to begin correction is always with those who should know better. In the early days of the tabernacle, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu disobeyed God and were destroyed by fire (Leviticus 10:1-2). The precedent continues throughout time. The apostle Peter explained that "judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17). This he said of God's New Testament Church. And in fact, the Church may well be the "sanctuary" of Ezekiel 9:6, at least in type.

The Church is the true "temple" of God today (Ephesians 2:19-22), as God dwells in His people through the Holy Spirit, making each individual Christian a temple or, in fact, part of the same temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16). That being so, consider the interesting statement God makes in Ezekiel 11, part of the same prophecy. Regarding "all the house of Israel in

its entirety” (verse 15), God says, “Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, *yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them* in the countries where they have gone” (verse 16). This ties in well with Christ’s statement to the Samaritan woman at the well: “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain [the Samaritan holy place], nor in Jerusalem [where the temple was], worship the Father.... The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:21-24)—that is, through the Holy Spirit, thereby becoming the spiritual temple of God, which is not confined to one place.

If the sanctuary in Ezekiel 9:6 is meant to portray the Church of God on some level (which, besides the parallels we’ve just seen, seems likely also because those to be protected in verse 4 are probably true Christians of the end time), then the indication is that punishment would apparently fall first and foremost on apostates from God’s truth. This would have to mean that the temple abominations of the previous chapter apply in part to such apostates—again, as mentioned in the commentary on Ezekiel 8, possibly indicating the great falling away from God’s truth foretold by the apostle Paul (2 Thessalonians 2). Moreover, there are degrees of responsibility even within the Church. The apostle James stated, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). So the “elders before the temple,” the first to be judged in Ezekiel 9:6, may well be apostate elders of God’s Church. Paul sternly warned Church elders that savage wolves would rise up from among *them* (Acts 20:17, 29-31).

Yet the sanctuary is just the beginning of the slaughter. It continues throughout all of Israel and Judah (Ezekiel 9:9-10). Ezekiel sees great numbers killed until He alone is left, and He cries out to God, asking Him if He is going to wipe out everyone who is left (verse 8). Of course, he already had the answer from verse 4 that some would be spared. But they were no longer here to be seen. God explains to Ezekiel that the punishment fits the crime, bemoaning the exceedingly great iniquity of Israel and Judah. The people have degenerated into depravity and disrespect for human life because of their false religion. They have denied the power and reach of God—but they won’t be able to deny it any longer. At that very moment the angel clothed in linen returns, reporting that he has done his job. This means he has marked all of those who wanted to obey God and they have been spared. God thus gives Ezekiel encouragement by the report of the angel.

Let us take heart as well and strive to be among those who sigh and cry over the abominations committed throughout the nations of Israel and the rest of the world, praying to God, “Your kingdom come.”

### **The Departure of God’s Glory (Ezekiel 10)**

**August 28-29**

The vision of chapters 8 and 9 continues in chapter 10. Here we have a lesson from God of considerable importance to us. For us to continue as God’s chosen people, He must actually dwell or live among us. The people of Israel came to understand this following their Exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 25:8 God instructed Moses, “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.” It was God’s intent at that time that He would dwell in the midst of the 12 tribes of Israel in the tabernacle made of goatskins. And His presence was evident in the pillar of cloud illuminated by the divine glory filling the tabernacle (see Exodus 40:34-35). As explained in previous comments, rabbis later designated this glory by the term *shekinah*, meaning “indwelling.”

God’s glory later came to dwell in the temple built by Solomon after his fervent and humble prayer (2 Chronicles 6-7). God chose to allow His presence—again evident through the radiance and splendor of His glory—to remain in the temple for centuries. Yet after the Jews had proven their determination to continue in false, idolatrous worship, the presence of God did eventually leave the Jerusalem temple prior to its looting and destruction by the Babylonians. Even when the second temple was rebuilt in its place after the return from Jewish exile, God’s glory did not occupy it. Moreover, there is no record of the shimmering, luminous glory ever again occupying an earthly building. However, centuries later the shepherds saw the glory appear in the sky as angels announced the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:9). Indeed, the coming of Christ in the flesh was, in essence, God coming to *dwell* with human beings (John 1:1, 14; Matthew 1:23). And after His death and resurrection, He would again do so through the Holy Spirit.

Later, Stephen proclaimed the truth that God no longer dwells in temples made with hands (Acts 7:48). As the apostle Paul explained, God’s temple is now His Church, the people whom He dwells in through the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16). And the initial

giving of the Spirit to the Church was accompanied by the miraculous signs of wind and fire, reminiscent of the glory of Ezekiel's vision (see Acts 2).

On the night before His death, Jesus relayed some very important guidelines for God dwelling in His people through the Holy Spirit: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to Him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23). Notice: in order for the Father and Jesus Christ to dwell with a person, that person must be obeying Christ's words. The apostle Paul repeats essentially the same principle in 2 Corinthians 6:16: "And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you [Christians] are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'"

But Paul goes on to follow this with a *warning* from God: "Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you" (verse 17). God dwelling among a people or in the heart and mind of a person is conditional upon that people or person being submissive and obedient to God. The presence of any idol or unclean worship will cause God to withdraw His presence. This is one of the most important lessons God is using Ezekiel to teach us in this chapter.

Ezekiel 10 begins with the image of the living cherubim carrying God's throne. God gives the order to the man in linen to gather coals of fire from between the cherubim and scatter them over the city of Jerusalem (verses 1-3). This symbolizes that God has now judged the city and it is to be punished and burned, as when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed with fire and brimstone (see Genesis 19:24-25). Yet as we've seen, the punishment on Jerusalem is representative of punishment to befall all of Israel (Ezekiel 9:9-10).

The glory or presence of God then begins to move. The step-by-step exit from Jerusalem is recorded for us. As the glory of God moved from the Holy of Holies to the threshold or entryway of the temple (9:3; 10:4), we see that the living cherubim carrying the mobile throne were waiting outside the temple on the south side (verse 3). The entire house and courtyard were filled with the surrounding cloud and brightness (verse 4). Then, apparently after God assigned the man in linen and the executioners their jobs, He left the temple threshold and ascended His mobile throne above the living cherubim, not returning to the physical Holy of Holies within the temple (verse 18). The cherubim may have moved to meet Him as we see them hovering, with Him above them, at the east gate of the temple (verse 19).

The east gate is probably the one referred to as "the gates of righteousness" and "the gate of the LORD" in Psalm 118:19-20 and the "everlasting doors" in Psalm 24:7, 9. It is called the "Sun gate" in a Talmudic passage (Erubin 5:22c) because the sun would shine through it in the morning. Also through this gate traditionally entered the king and the ark in the sacred processions.

In the next chapter, we will see that when the glory of God leaves the temple through the east gate, it proceeds to the mountain on the east side of Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 11:23)—after which it presumably ascends to heaven. This path is opposite to the one Jesus Christ will take when He returns to the earth in power and glory in the future. For at that time He will first descend to the Mount of Olives and then, sometime later following the construction of the millennial temple, enter Jerusalem through the east gate, accompanied by the glory of God (Ezekiel 43:1-5; Zechariah 14:4; Acts 1:9-12; Matthew 24:27). Indeed, a principal theme in this vision and the whole of the book of Ezekiel is the departure and eventual return of God's glory to Jerusalem.

The description of the cherubim takes up a lot of Ezekiel 10, paralleling material from chapter 1. Ezekiel describes the transportation system of God's throne almost exactly as he saw it earlier. His word picture of the cherubim, wheels rotating within each other with eyes apparently on the rims, the shimmering light in various colors, and the four faces of a cherub, man, lion, and eagle are almost identical to the previous account. This reveals that he was seeing the same God and the same throne. Since all of the faces are the same as those in chapter 1 with the exception of the "face of a cherub," it is obvious that this face is the same as the face of the ox (1:10).

Another detail to note is that where the wheels are called "Wheel" in the New King James Version of verse 13, others translate the word here as "whirling" or "spinning." The sound of the cherubim wings became very loud as the throne of God moved out of the temple. It could be heard even in the "outer court" (verse 5). This may symbolize God leaving Jerusalem in a public way, having the fact perceived or loudly proclaimed.

God had in fact prophesied the departure of His glory well in advance. Back in Deuteronomy 31:17-18, He had warned: "Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, and *I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them*, and they shall be devoured. And many evils and troubles shall befall them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us

*because our God is not among us?'"* In Hosea 9:12, God proclaimed, "Woe to them when I depart from them!"

In all these warnings, Ezekiel included, we should recognize that God was not only talking about the ancient destruction He brought on His people. He is also talking about the future—of nations today and of us individually. All of us have a choice before us of whether to be faithful to God or to reject Him. The apostle Paul taught that the greatest mystery of all time is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Jesus Christ living in us through His Spirit is the most wonderful thing a human being can experience in this life. Yet one of the main lessons from Ezekiel is that God stays only where He is wanted and obeyed. This is true of nations, this is true of church fellowships, and this is true of every individual.

God withdrawing is never what He wants—it is people who force it on Him. Whenever His place of dwelling—whether a person, a church or religious organization or an entire nation—is filled with objects of false worship or idols, *there is no more room for Him*. After all, His name is Jealous (Exodus 34:14) and He will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8). Satan has organized society so that God is squeezed out—we now have no time for Him. Christ illustrated this in the parable of the sower with the new plants being choked by the thorns (see Matthew 13:7, 22). As individuals we often fill our lives with economic pressure, constant entertainment and various pursuits—and then we wonder why God is not truly manifested and working in our lives. The book of Hebrews warns us not to neglect so great a salvation as that which has been offered to us (2:1-3)—yet we at times come to the realization that we are doing just that. As Paul said to all of us, "It is high time to awake out of sleep" (Romans 13:11). May studying God's message through Ezekiel aid us in doing just that.

### **Meat in a Cauldron; A Heart of Flesh (Ezekiel 11)**

**August 30-31**

Ezekiel 11 concludes the vision that started in chapter 8. Ezekiel is now shown a group of 25 men that may or may not be the same as the group of 25 sun worshipers in 8:16. Those here are designated as "princes of the people" (11:1)—possibly civil leaders as this term "denotes public and political officials often serving in judicial, military, or royal posts (see 2 Sam. 8:15-18; 20:23-26)" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Ezekiel 11:1-2). However, leading priests were "princes of the sanctuary" (Isaiah 43:28). Perhaps these are religious leaders who are also acting as civil leaders—or maybe just as ringleaders among the people in evil pursuits.

The Jaazaniah of Ezekiel 11:1 is the son of Azzur, not Shaphan as in 8:11. Again, perhaps the meaning of the name, "God Hears" or "God Harkens," is significant: "Azur means 'help.' He [Jaazaniah] and Pelatiah ('God delivers'), son of Benaiah ('God builds'), are singled out...because their names ought to have reminded them that 'God' would have 'heard' had they sought His 'help' to 'deliver' and 'build' them up. But neglecting this, they incurred the heavier judgment by the very relation in which they stood to God" (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on verse 1).

God told Ezekiel that these men were plotting evil and giving wicked advice in Jerusalem. Remember that Jerusalem in this vision, while pointing literally to the city of Ezekiel's time on one level, is also intended to represent all of Israel and Judah in the end time, just prior to Christ's return (compare 9:9-10; 11; 15-21).

Verse 3, which relates the wicked advice given, is clearer in the earlier King James Version than in the New King James: "It [presumably calamity] is not near; let us build houses" (KJV). Perhaps better still, the NIV has, "Will it not soon be time to build houses?" What about the rest of the verse? The New Living Translation renders it, "Our city is like an iron pot. Inside it we will be like meat—safe from all harm."

In Ezekiel's day, this directly contradicted the warnings he and Jeremiah had been giving. As leaders, those making these claims should have heeded the threat posed by Babylon and leveled with the people. Yet, instead, they are shown wickedly promoting a false sense of security. Evidently, they themselves were living in denial—confident that even if they came under attack, the walls of Jerusalem and the presence of God's temple would protect them from harm just like a cooking pot protects the meat inside from the flames of fire outside. Of course, this was foolishness—especially as God had sent such dire warnings through His true servants. The leaders had a responsibility to heed and spread the warning themselves. But they failed miserably in this respect, even going in the exact opposite, quite evil direction by saying all would be well. The same thing often happens among our national leaders today—and will in fact get far worse as the end of the age approaches.

God places the blame for the great number of deaths in the city on the shoulders of the leaders (11:6)—as He earlier placed it on the shoulders of the religious leaders (8:17; see also 9:9). This could

mean that the high murder rate is due to a failure to honor and teach God's laws. Or it could refer to the deaths that have already come as punishment for the people's sins—the leaders being culpable for failing to properly acknowledge God and educate the nations in His ways and for giving a false sense of security, for not warning the people. When Ezekiel received this vision, the leaders already bore responsibility for the two previous attacks on Judah that left many dead in 605 and 597 B.C.—just as they would be responsible for the terrible slaughter that would follow. The same will be true of leaders in the end time.

In this light, God then uses the cooking pot analogy against them. He agrees that the city is a cooking pot of meat—only it is a pot of *dead* meat! The corpses of the slain are the meat, being cooked, so to speak (verse 7). Yet this would not include the particular leaders being addressed. They would indeed be killed, but not before they see the full calamity being brought. God says that the city would *not* be *their* cauldron. Rather, they would be run out of it and given into foreign hands, to be executed *outside* of Israel (verses 8-11).

Notice that Israel is again identified with Jerusalem here, which may point to an end-time fulfillment. However, Israel also designates the Promised Land (compare verse 17) and these verses could conceivably apply to what happened to certain leaders in Ezekiel's own day. Notice what later occurred after Jerusalem's fall to the Babylonians: "And the captain of the guard took Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the second priest...an officer who had charge of the men of war, five men of the king's close associates who were found in the city, the chief recruiting officer of the army...and 60 men of the people of the land who were found in the city.... [and] brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah [in Syria]. Then the king of Babylon struck them and put them to death" (2 Kings 25:18-21).

Whoever the 25 leaders are intended to portray, through judgment they would finally come to see the reality of God—that is, of the true God, whom they had denied by not heeding His law and by corrupting His worship with pagan customs and concepts (Ezekiel 11:12).

In verse 13, Ezekiel sees Pelatiah (mentioned in verse 1) die and cries out, asking if God will even leave a remnant. Perhaps Pelatiah is the first of the 25 leaders to fall in the vision. Or, just the opposite, maybe Ezekiel saw the other 24 killed and Pelatiah is the last. And it could be that his name, again meaning "God Delivers" or "Delivered of God," is significant—that is, if he is not delivered, will anyone be?

Starting in verse 14, God responds to Ezekiel by giving him a wonderful message of comfort and hope. Verse 15 may be slightly mistranslated in the New King James Version. The picture seems to be that the Jews of Jerusalem are saying that all of Israel in exile—the scattered northern tribes and the Jews in Babylon—have been carried far away from God (through virtue of being far from Jerusalem). Consequently, the Jews of Jerusalem see the Promised Land as belonging solely to them. However, the reality is that those with such a mindset in Jerusalem are going to be destroyed while those in exile will ultimately be given the land (verse 17). Yet this would not happen until later generations.

Indeed, even the Jewish return from exile at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah would not fulfill this passage, as it is "all the house of Israel in its entirety" (verse 15) that is to be given the land of Israel and, at that time, they are shown to be repentant and spiritually converted (verses 18-20), signifying the period of Jesus Christ's future reign on earth—as described in Isaiah 11 and many other passages. During the centuries of scattering, God says that He Himself would serve as a "little sanctuary" among the people (Ezekiel 11:16), perhaps indicating, as explained in the comments on chapter 9, the Church of God—referred to in Scripture as the "little flock" and the "body of Christ."

When the captives of Israel and Judah are at long last brought back to the Promised Land in the future, they will purge it of all abominations (verse 18). God then gives hope for a beautiful future of reconciliation with Him for all Israel. The final message of Ezekiel 11 tells us much about God's great mercy and compassion. In the depth of their sins, while they still practiced idolatry, God promises these people that one day in the future they will be given an opportunity to repent, return to their land and make a new covenant with Him. This covenant will be different from their past experience because God will cause the "stony" (stubborn and hard) heart of evil and rebellion to be removed from them and will replace it with a heart of "flesh"—one that is soft, malleable, emotionally tender and responsive. In other words, He will give them His Spirit, the indwelling presence of His glory, and cause them to desire to obey His laws (verses 19-20). Again, we see a marvelous consistency between the messages of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament about God's plan for mankind—contrary to what today's counterfeit Christianity would have us believe. (See the Bible Reading Program comments on Jeremiah 31 for a fuller explanation of the New Covenant that God will make with Israel and Judah.)

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Even then, verse 21 of Ezekiel 11 cautions that there will yet be those who refuse to obey God and their heart will desire detestable things. Justice will be meted out to them as they deserve.

Finally, Ezekiel sees the glory of God depart from Jerusalem (verses 22-23). In His vision He is transported back to the exiles in Babylonia. And thus his vision comes to an end, whereupon he reports all he has seen to the exiles—starting, no doubt, with those elders who were then seated with him in his house, where he had actually been all along (see 8:1).

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