

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

STUDY BOOK
SUMMER 2023



**FAITHFUL LIVING IN
A FOREIGN LAND**

The Book of
Ezekiel and Daniel



Thru-the-Bible
Book by Book

Ezekiel and Daniel

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Ezekiel and Daniel

The people of God have had a long history of not listening to Him. After hundreds of years of warning, divine judgment fell upon the Israelites and they were sent into exile in foreign lands—first into Assyria and finally to Babylon. Though God was compelled to judge His children severely, He never stopped loving them. He continued to speak to Israel through the prophets as He tried to woo His children back to loving Him with their hearts, souls, and minds.

During this time the Israelites were indeed an obstinate and rebellious people, but God refused to give up on them. He knew they needed to hear His message more than ever during the dark days of bondage in Babylon.

In general, things have changed very little over the centuries. Rebellious people are still held captive by sin. The words of the prophets are as relevant to them as they were to Israel and the nations that surrounded it hundreds of years ago.

The Prophecy of Ezekiel

Strange visions like spinning wheels and a valley of dry bones that come to life have caused many readers of Ezekiel's prophecy more than a little puzzlement. And not surprisingly, these visions have generated wildly different interpretations of many passages. Some have even suggested that Ezekiel's whirling gyroscopic wheels represent some type of extraterrestrial spaceship.

The problem of understanding Ezekiel's prophecies has a long

history. At least as early as the late fourth and early fifth centuries, the great Bible scholar Jerome offered numerous apologies in his commentaries for an inability to better explain difficult passages.

But for the reader who is willing to dig a little deeper into the Book of Ezekiel, there is a wealth of spiritual insight into God's patient involvement and dealings with His people during this dark period of Israel's history.

Authorship of the Book

Little biographical information is known about Ezekiel, but there is almost uniform agreement among scholars that he was the sole author of the book bearing his name. The writer is identified as a "priest, the

son of Buzi" (Ezek. 1:3). Ezekiel, meaning "God strengthens," is mentioned along with Jeremiah and Zechariah as the only prophet-priests in Scripture. All three prophesied either during the period of

Israel's exile or in the period immediately after.

Ezekiel spent his early years in Jerusalem. As his writing shows, he was very familiar with the city and its temple. After he was taken captive to Babylon, the prophet lived in his own house in a village near Nipur on the Kebar (or Chebar) River.

Date of Writing

The date of writing and span of Ezekiel's ministry can be established by the numerous dates given in the book (1:1-2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1). The prophecies of Ezekiel are presented in chronological order (two exceptions are found in 29:1, 17). The prophecies began with "the fifth year of the exile" (1:2), and concluded

Apparently a person of some stature among the leaders of his people, Ezekiel's home became a central meeting place (8:1; 14:1; 20:1).

We know that the prophet was married. But ten years into the exile his wife died suddenly, perhaps of the plague (24:16-18). The couple was apparently childless.

with "the twenty-fifth year of our exile" (40:1).

Based on these chronological pegs, it is possible to deduce that Ezekiel's ministry began on July 31, 593 B.C., probably when he was 30 years old (1:1-2). His ministry ended around March 26, 571 (29:17). By this reckoning, Ezekiel prophesied for approximately 22 years, from age 30 to 52.

Structure and Contents

In Ezekiel, at least two major structural features are evident. The first of these are the chronological presentation of significant events, visions, and oracles. But this chronological arrangement is paralleled by a presentation of the material based on content. The central theme of chapters 1—24 is the judgment of Judah, while that of chapters 33—48 speak of Judah's future restoration. Between these two major focal points, in chapters 25—32, Ezekiel

pronounced God's judgment upon other nations.

The content of Ezekiel's prophecies was delivered through a variety of literary means. These included symbolic actions, allegories or parables, and most importantly, visions. In broad outline, the first vision focused on the presence of God's glory in Babylon (1—3), the second on the judgment of Jerusalem (8—11), the third (37) and fourth visions (40—48) on the future restoration of Judah.

The Prophecy of Daniel

The Book of Daniel, while having its share of interpretive problems like Ezekiel, nevertheless contains stories known and loved by genera-

tions of believers and unbelievers alike. What child who has spent any time in Sunday school cannot tell the story of Daniel in the lions' den? Or

who does not know at least the basic elements of the deliverance of Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from Nebuchadnezzar's

fiery furnace? Miraculous events like these have given Daniel a place in many people's hearts that is usually denied the more mysterious Ezekiel.



Authorship and Date of Writing

The Book of Daniel is simply titled in the Hebrew Bible, "Daniel," meaning "God is my judge." The reason for the name is twofold. First, Daniel is the chief character in the events unfolded. Second, it was Hebrew custom to identify a book by the name of the author. The author of this book is identified as "Daniel" (Dan. 12:4).

Like Ezekiel, little is known about Daniel's background. He was of noble birth and belonged to the ranks of royalty (1:3, 6). In appearance and aptitude, he was classed among a group of young men who were physically fit and highly intelligent (1:4). Among those who knew him, Daniel was highly regarded for his righteous character and superior wisdom (see Ezek. 14:14, 20; 28:3).

The latest date for Daniel's life that can be fixed with certainty is 536 B.C. That was the third year of Cyrus's reign (Dan. 10:1). Since Daniel was taken captive to Babylon as a young man in 605 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar, he was probably in his eighties during the reign of Cyrus.

In earliest times, the traditional view among Jews and Christians alike was that Daniel wrote the book bearing his name, and that it was composed in the sixth century in Babylon. However, from at least the third century of the church age, the authorship and date of Daniel have been hotly disputed. Many arguments are set forth by critics for rejecting the traditional view, but their underlying reason is usually a rejection of miraculous prophecy.

How to Use the Study Book

The *Study Book* is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the *Study Book* until you get the meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer of the "Ask Yourself"

questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

Note: Just because some passages are treated "in brief" does not mean that they are unimportant or that you don't need to read them in your Bible as part of your study of Ezekiel and Daniel.

1

The Beginning of Ezekiel's Ministry

Ezekiel 1—7

Ezekiel 1 in Brief

Ezekiel began the written account of his ministry with chronological data and minimal biographical information about himself. But he quickly got to the heart of his message by introducing the reader to one of the several visions he would have by the Kebar River. In this vision, God revealed His glory to the prophet to prepare him for the ministry to which He would call him.

In the vision, four living creatures appeared who were later identified as cherubim (see 10:2). These angelic beings stand guard over the holiness of God's throne (see Exod. 25:10-22; 1 Kings 6:23-28). In appearance, Ezekiel described the cherubim as basically human in form, but winged and having some characteristics of lions, oxen, and eagles. The great mobility of these creatures was symbolized by four wheels.

Above the cherubim was a platform of ice or crystal. On the platform was the One who sat upon a sapphire throne. Thus in dazzling splendor, God appeared to Ezekiel.

a Ezekiel's Call (2:1-10)

[The Lord] said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day." —Ezekiel 2:3

God's person to deliver His message to Israel and the Gentile nations was a man of holy character who lived what he preached. Ezekiel called the people to repent and obey God's voice, no matter what. The prophet himself obeyed even when asked to do strange things such as lie on one side for 390 days while living on famine-size rations, shave his head and beard, and show no sorrow at the death of his dear wife.

The Lord evaluates His children according to their faithfulness to Him. Unfortunately, the chief characteristic of God's people in Ezekiel's day was rebelliousness. The remedy for Israel's condition then was the same as it is for an obstinate spirit today. Only confession of sin

and an obedient heart can bring about the peace and courage necessary to live a life that honors God.

God addressed Ezekiel as “Son of man” 93 times in this book. This title was used quite frequently of Christ to call attention to His true humanity. In the prophet’s case, it was a reminder to Ezekiel that he was a mere mortal human being who served the omnipotent Lord of the universe. The exhausted prophet was instructed to rise to his feet to receive God’s message. What God called Ezekiel to do He enabled him do with the aid of the Spirit (vss. 1, 2).

Today, the Holy Spirit permanently indwells all believers. In Old Testament times, however, He came upon particular individuals

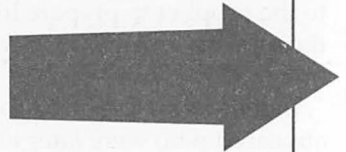
to empower them for some specific divine service. In this case, the task was to deliver a message to a stubborn, defiant people who had a long history of disobeying God (vss. 3-4).

The picture of the Israelites’ spiritual condition was of a people who shamelessly refused to accept God’s assessment of their moral state and spiritual need. The Babylonian exiles not only declined to confess their sin, they actually expected a speedy return to their land. Consequently, they failed to recognize the reality of impending judgment upon their disobedient nation.

Ask Yourself . . . *Could I be blind to some sin in my life? If so, who could help me see it?*

FORCED INTO

EXILE



When the 300-year dominance of the Assyrian empire came to an end, Babylon and Egypt competed for mastery of the Middle East. The contest was decided at the Battle of Carchemish where the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, defeated Pharaoh Necho of Egypt in 605 B.C. After the battle, Judah became a vassal state under Babylonian rule. At that time, Daniel, among others, was deported to Babylon.

In time, Judah’s King Jehoiakim decided to rebel against Babylonian rule. In response, Nebuchadnezzar dispatched an invasion force. Jehoiakim died before the Babylonian army reached Judah, and his successor Jehoiachin surrendered without a fight. Just three months into his reign in 597 B.C., Judah’s new king watched helplessly as Jerusalem was plundered and thousands of upper-class citizens, including Ezekiel, were deported to Babylon.

But God told Ezekiel the people's attitude was not his responsibility. As His appointed watchman for the house of Israel, Ezekiel's only task was to faithfully proclaim God's message (2:5-7; see 3:17). If the people refused to heed the warning, then their blood would be on their own hands (see 3:19). Yet in the process, they would surely come to know that God's appointed messenger had been among them.

As a prophet, Ezekiel was a spokesman for the "Sovereign LORD" (2:4b). This title for God is used 217 times in the Book of Ezekiel, while occurring only 103 times in the rest of the Old Testament. The title emphasized God's sovereign authority over Israel and His faithfulness in keeping the covenantal promises He made to His people.

Ezekiel was told three times in these verses not to be afraid. Facing a group of hard-hearted, hateful, angry people would be no walk in the park. The prophet's assignment was dangerous, difficult, and would require a great deal of courage. There is no evidence, however, that Ezekiel retreated in fear from the task at hand or failed to be obedient to God's commands (vs. 8a). He faithfully received God's message and courageously delivered it to the people. God's strength is all His people need in any age to overcome ridicule and rejection, no matter how severe it may seem.

Ezekiel's obedience and responsiveness to God's word were demonstrated by the prophet's willingness to eat what was given to him directly

by the hand of God in the form of a scroll (vss. 8b, 9; see 3:2). On the scroll were "written words of lament and mourning and woe" (vs. 10). This was an appropriate description of the coming destruction outlined in chapters 4—32.

Some Christians may feel ineffective and defeated when they faithfully witness to the lost but nothing seems to happen. On some mission fields, the Lord's servants have labored tirelessly for a lifetime with only a handful of converts to show for their efforts. While some may regard these as examples of "fruitless" ministry, Ezekiel learned that God's perspective is different. Our responsibility is to obey God by exercising the spiritual gifts He has given us; we cannot control how people will respond to our efforts in ministry.



Ezekiel's Commission (3:1-15)

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

—Ezekiel 3:11

In the advertising world, success depends upon knowing what customers want and getting them to respond to your sales pitch. In this section, Ezekiel was instructed to deliver a message to the people of

Israel whether they responded positively or not. But the prophet was only responsible for obeying God's command, not for the reaction of the people. In the same way, God calls His children today to faithfully proclaim the message of salvation. He does not hold them accountable, however, for the ways that nonbelievers respond to that message.

Two more times, God repeated His command to Ezekiel to eat the scroll (vss. 1a, 3a). Having done this, the prophet was to proclaim the scroll's message, not just to the exiles, but to "the people of Israel" (vss. 1b, 4). Though the Jews in exile, (with whom Ezekiel lived), were the prophet's immediate audience, God's message was intended for all the people of Israel. Ezekiel had already received his call as a prophet. Now he received his commission to carry out the task for which God had called him.

When Ezekiel obediently ate the scroll, he found it honey-sweet to the taste (vss. 2, 3b). The message of coming judgment was bitter, but the scroll itself was sweet because it contained God's Word. By eating the scroll, Ezekiel symbolically appropriated the Word of God for himself and made it part of his very being. Simply knowing the Bible is not enough. The Scriptures must be digested and put into practice before they can produce a significant impact in a person's life and the lives of others.

Perhaps as a word of encouragement, Ezekiel was reminded that he was not being sent to a foreign land

where there would be a language barrier to overcome. His message was to his own people. The downside of this encouraging news was that, while foreigners in other lands would have listened to the prophet, his own countrymen would be spiritually deaf. God warned Ezekiel that the people would reject him because they had rejected God Himself (vss. 5-7).

Ask Yourself . . . *Are there any barriers I need to overcome in order to faithfully serve the Lord?*

Though the people had become hardened, God promised to strengthen Ezekiel for his mission by making his inner resolve tougher than theirs. Ezekiel had no reason to fear the people, because God would make the prophet's "forehead," figuratively representing resolve and determination, harder than flint. Flint, the hardest stone found in all of Palestine, was often used to make weapons and tools. With this encouragement, Ezekiel was commanded to listen carefully to God's words, take them to heart, and then deliver them to his fellow exiles (vss. 8-11).

At the vision's conclusion, Ezekiel was transported by the Holy Spirit back to "Tel Aviv near the Kebar River" (vss. 12a, 14a, 15a). The community of exiles from Jerusalem had settled there. This transport was clearly supernatural. The rest of Ezekiel's transportations to various places were either miraculous or normal (see 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5).

As Ezekiel was being taken up by the Holy Spirit, he heard a loud rumbling sound behind as "the glory of the LORD rose from the place where it was standing" (vs. 12b). The source of the sound was the wings of the living creatures "brushing against each other" and the "sound of the wheels beside them" (vs. 13).

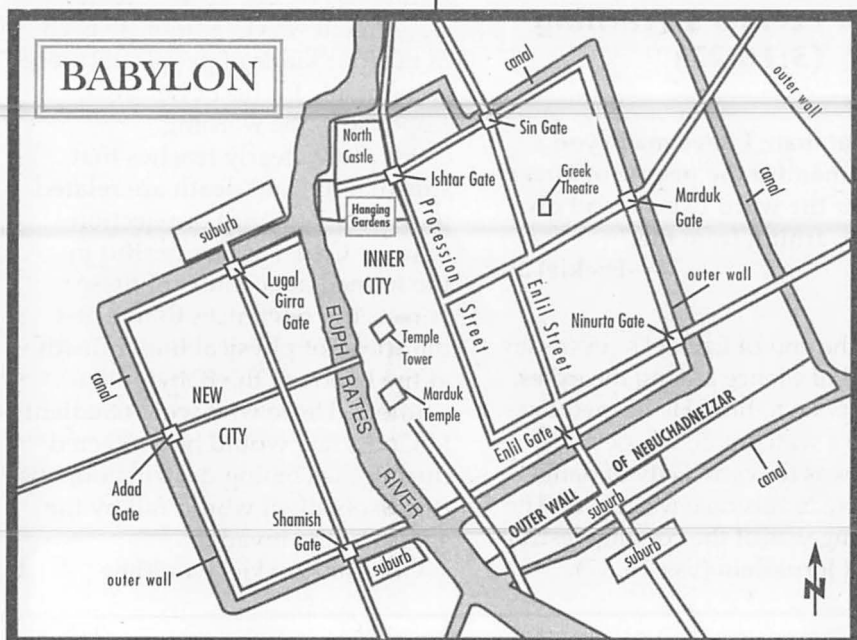
The prophet returned to the exiles at Tel Aviv in an emotional state of bitterness and anger (vs. 14b). Ezekiel's strong feelings may have been caused by the feeling that the people's stubbornness would make his task virtually impossible. Or he may have identified deeply with God's righteous indignation toward the sin of Israel.

Whatever the cause, the prophet was so emotionally affected by the divine vision and the over-

The Grand Canal

The precise location of the Babylonian site of Tel Aviv is not known. But the Kebar River has been identified with the Babylonian "Grand Canal." The Euphrates River cut through the middle of ancient Babylon, and was the source of several canals that surrounded the city.

The Grand Canal left the Euphrates just north of Babylon, ran east of the city, through the city of Nippur, and then doubled back to the Euphrates near Erech. Nippur and Erech were ancient city-states founded by the Sumerians.



whelming task set before him that for seven days he sat in stunned solitude among his fellow captives (vs. 15b). Ironically, seven days was the normal period of mourning for the dead (see Gen. 50:10; 1 Sam. 31:13; Job 2:13). Israel was spiritually dead, but Ezekiel seemed to be the only one who knew it.

As we learn through Ezekiel's experience, God longs for His children to be responsive to His Word and to the plight of those destined for judgment. Yet at the same time, He expects our resolve in ministry to be hardened by commitment to Him. Armed with divinely bestowed courage, the child of God can face even the most hostile sinner without the fear of intimidation.



Ezekiel's Warning (3:16-27)

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

—Ezekiel 3:17

At the end of Ezekiel's seven-day period of silence among the exiles, God spoke to him. He likened Ezekiel to a watchman, whose responsibility was to warn a city of danger. The city in this case was Israel. The warning was of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (vss. 16, 17).

The image of the watchman in Ezekiel points out the importance of individual responsibility and accountability before God. The prophet repeated a message the people should have learned long ago. God expects His children to show their devotion and love for Him by being obedient. Ezekiel set the example by being a faithful and vigilant "watchman on the wall" who cried out a warning that danger was rapidly approaching God's people.

Ezekiel's responsibility as a watchman included confronting four different kinds of people: (1) the habitual sinner who received no warning (vs. 18); (2) the sinner who was warned but failed to repent (vs. 19); (3) the righteous person who turned to sin and was not warned (vs. 20); and (4) the righteous person who was warned and remained righteous (vs. 21). While Ezekiel's assignment was to admonish each of the four kinds of people, all were accountable for his or her own response to the warning.

Scripture clearly teaches that spiritual life and death are related to one's acceptance or rejection of Jesus Christ as Savior. But in the immediate context of these verses, the references to live or die speak of physical life or death at the hands of the Babylonian soldiers. Those who were obedient to God's law would be protected during the coming destruction, but the disobedient would fall by the sword of the invaders.

God said Ezekiel would be

THE WATCHMAN ON THE **W A L L**

In Bible times, the occupation of watchman included standing guard on a city's wall or in one of the wall's watchtowers or gates in order to warn the residents of impending danger.

A watchman also patrolled the streets and cried out the hours of the night watch (see 2 Sam. 18:24-27; S. of S. 5:7; Isa. 21:11, 12). Early warning gave people outside the city walls time to find a secure place. For those inside the walls, it afforded an opportunity to close the gates and place warriors at the battle stations.

delivered from any responsibility for what would happen to his people during the coming destruction if he faithfully warned them. If the people failed to respond to the alarm and continued in their sin, then they had no one but themselves to blame for the consequences. Their blood would be upon their own heads.

While all are personally responsible for how they respond to the gospel, believers have an obligation

to warn the lost of the consequences of rejecting God's offer of salvation. As with Ezekiel, if we fail in this task, God will hold us accountable for not warning those who perish. This ought to be a strong incentive to share our faith at every appropriate opportunity.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I create some appropriate opportunities to share the gospel?*

Ezekiel was then called out to an unspecified plain or valley. There again he was shown God's glory and, as before, he collapsed in humble reverence. Also as before, the Spirit energized Ezekiel for his mission by entering him and raising him to his feet (vss. 22-24a). After this experience, God placed certain restraints upon the prophet.

Ezekiel was confined to his home away from general association with the people as a symbol of the rebellion of the Jews and their opposition to God's message (vss. 24b, 25). Apparently, this confinement was not total because Ezekiel was still able to go out on occasion (see 5:2; 12:3). And the prophet was allowed to converse with Jewish leaders who came to his house privately to hear God's message (see 8:1; 14:1; 20:1).

An additional restraint upon Ezekiel was the inability to speak, except when God wanted him to deliver a message to the people (vss. 26, 27). This intermittent loss of speech continued until Jerusalem fell (see 24:27). But even when Ezekiel did speak on God's behalf,

he was warned that only those who were spiritually receptive would receive the message. In all ages, whether God's message is accepted or rejected depends upon the heart condition of the one who hears it (see Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9).

Ezekiel 4—7 in Brief

With great symbolism and in graphic language, Ezekiel revealed the impending destruction of Jerusalem to the exiles. The prophet was told to act out the extent of the exile by lying on his left side for 390 days to represent the sin of the northern kingdom of Israel, and to lie on his right side for 40 days to symbolize the sin of Judah. Together, the 430 days are apparently meant to recall the 430-year bondage in Egypt.

Ezekiel also learned about the horrors of the coming siege. As a

sign to the people of coming famine, the prophet was allowed to drink only one quart of water per day and eat just eight ounces of coarse bread. This famine diet added greatly to Ezekiel's discomfort as he spent much of his time confined to lying on his side.

The shaving of Ezekiel's hair and beard represented the fate of Jerusalem's inhabitants. A third of his hair was to represent those who would die of plague or famine. Another third of the people would die by the sword while the final third would remain in peril as they were led away captive to Babylon.

A few strands of hair, that is, a remnant, would remain. Israel was judged because of idolatry. But in the end, a remnant of God's people would come to understand the meaning and purpose of this terrible judgment and repent.

2

A Preview of Israel's Future

Ezekiel 8—12

Ezekiel 8:1—11:15 in Brief

Fourteen months after his call to ministry, Ezekiel was transported in a vision to Jerusalem where he was shown the horrors of idolatry being practiced in the temple. In spite of repeated warnings and punishments, Judah sank deeper into the degradation of idolatrous worship. God would tolerate it no more.

God's judgment of Judah's idolatry came to Ezekiel in a vision in which the idolaters were slain by the sword. The cherubim introduced in chapter 1 reappeared to oversee the destruction of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. This judgment clearly fell upon Jerusalem's ruling authorities because they led the people astray by "plotting evil and giving wicked advice in this city" (11:2).

For their part in Judah's sin, Ezekiel prophesied the downfall and judgment of these wicked civil leaders among God's people. God promised the prophet that He would indeed preserve a remnant in Israel. But it would be composed of the exiled captives, not the Jews living in Jerusalem.

a Israel's Return Promised (11:16-25)

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again."

—Ezekiel 11:17

Ezekiel reminded the people over and over that judgment was coming because of their own sin. But what terrible thing had the Israelites done to deserve the divine wrath that was about to be poured out upon them? The answer to this question was revealed to Ezekiel in a vision as he was transported to Jerusalem to witness firsthand the evil and corruption there. The people's wickedness was why God's judgment would surely come.

Failure to repent of sin when it is revealed always leads to divine discipline. This was true in the Garden of Eden. It is still true today.

But even as judgment was guaranteed for the house of Israel, God assured the people of His continued

presence with them. He promised to restore the faithful remnant to their land even though divine justice required that He punish the sin of His disobedient children. Even in the face of severe judgment, Jehovah neither ceased to be the God of Israel, nor did He withhold love from His people. The Lord's arms are never closed to those who turn away from their sin and come to Him.

The Israelites may have been denied access to their temple in Jerusalem, but God Himself continued to be their sanctuary and protector no matter where they found themselves in the world (vs. 16). Like the faithful exiles, God's children in all ages have sanctuary in Him regardless of circumstances or geographical location. Protection is guaranteed for those who place their trust in the Lord.

God's blessing upon the captive exiles was shown in the fact of His providing sanctuary for them in the present. But blessing was promised for the future as well. God pledged that Israel would one day be restored as a nation in the promised land (vs. 17). He would gather the Jews from the nations where they were being held captive and bring them back to their homeland again. This was partially fulfilled by the return of the exiles under Ezra and Nehemiah. But Ezekiel pointed to the completion of the restoration at some distant time in the future (see 36:24-38; 37:11-28).

Israel's restoration in the land would involve a spiritual revival among the people. Idols would be

purged from the land. The hardened hearts of the Hebrews would be replaced with transformed hearts committed to obeying God's commands and to renewed fellowship with Him. Those who persisted in their idolatry would suffer the just consequences of their sin with no one to blame but themselves (12:18-21).

Israel was suffering the humiliation of foreign captivity because of the sin of idolatry. But God would fix that. He would perform spiritual heart transplant surgery on a sick and dying people in order to give them new life with a new future.

This new life, characterized by the replacement of a cold indifferent heart of stone with a tender responsive heart of flesh, is the unique work of the Holy Spirit. While He alone can cause the transformation, sinners must recognize and reject their sin. Then the Holy Spirit will come in and replace the old life of indifference and rebellion with a new one energized by God's power.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is my heart soft or hard toward God?*

As the vision came to a conclusion, Ezekiel described the departure of God's glory from the city of Jerusalem. It was a symbol of the nation's judgment and doom. The glory of the God of Israel was above the outspread-wings of the cherubim as it began to rise up and leave the city (vss. 22, 23).

The divine glory moved eastward, crossed the Kidron Valley, and stopped over the Mount of Olives. God's glory would return in the

Supernatural Servants

Cherubim, or angels, played a significant role in Ezekiel's visions. Angels are supernatural beings created by God to serve Him (Job 38:6-7; Col. 1:16). The Jews believed that all the angels had names and belonged to a complex hierarchical system. While angels do apparently belong to groups and ranks, the precise nature of these is unknown. The Bible itself names only two heavenly angels, Michael and Gabriel.

Michael is referred to in the Bible as an "archangel" (Jude 9). He is also called "one of the chief princes" (Dan. 10:13). In addition to the cherubim, other groups of angels alluded to in Scripture are ruling angels (Eph. 3:10), guardian angels (Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14), seraphim (Isa. 6:1-3), and "elect angels" (1 Tim. 5:21).

future, apparently from the east to the Mount of Olives, to bless the restored nation of Israel (see 43:1-4). You may recall that it was from the Mount of Olives also that the risen Christ ascended to heaven. And it was to the Mount of Olives that He promised to make His future return (see Acts 1:9-12).

The vision ended with the Holy Spirit transporting Ezekiel back to the exiles in Babylon. There the prophet revealed the contents of the vision to his people (Ezek. 11:24, 25). But the divine message was not met with a favorable response. Once again Ezekiel modeled the principle for believers of all time that our top priority is faithfulness to God's commands, regardless of the outcome or consequences.

b Israel's Exile Symbolized (12:1-16)

"Son of man, pack your belongings for exile and in the daytime, as they watch, set out and go from where you are to another place. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious people."

—Ezekiel 12:3

Ezekiel had tried to explain that the divine judgment upon Judah was morally necessary because of the people's disobedience (see chapters 4—11). Even after several signs, two messages, and a long vision, the

people refused to believe that Jerusalem was really going to fall and all of Judah along with it. The prophet's task now was to dispel the mistaken notion that the current crisis would pass and that there was reason for optimism about Israel's future. Ezekiel had to convince the people that Judah's doom was a "done deal."

The Israelites were spiritually deaf and blind to the fact of coming judgment. Consequently, Ezekiel was told to act out in two signs the role of a captive being led away into exile in the hope that the Israelites would finally get the message.

In the face of rampant disobedience today, we could imagine God saying, "What do I have to do to get their attention?" God's Word is complete, the message is clear, yet so many refuse to believe it or act upon it.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has God gotten my attention lately?*

The Israelites were described as an unbelieving, willfully rebellious people (vs. 2). It was not that they were incapable of understanding the message, they just deliberately chose not to accept it. Things have not changed much in today's world. God's message is proclaimed in simple, clear terms via print and electronic media, yet multitudes of people deliberately refuse to receive it.

Nevertheless, God refused to give up on His people without giving them every opportunity to respond to His warning. Perhaps pantomimed signs would get through

where plain speech had not. So the Lord explained the first action-sign to Ezekiel, the sign of the baggage and hole in the wall.

To emphasize the source of his message, Ezekiel used the phrase, "The word of the LORD came to me" (vs. 1). This formula was used nine more times by the prophet (see 12:17, 21; 13:1; 14:2, 12; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1; 18:1). The one exception is the lament section beginning at 19:1.

The first action sign had two parts. Ezekiel was commanded to prepare a kind of rucksack exile's baggage containing the barest essentials. He was instructed to bring it out during the day and simply walk somewhere else as the people watched (12:3). Since the exiles had been forced to do this themselves just six years earlier in preparation for their deportation to Babylon, they should have had no trouble understanding the message.

Ezekiel was to act out the second part of the sign in the evening. Again as the people watched, he was supposed to bring out his exile baggage, then dig through the mudbrick of the city wall as though trying to escape. The prophet was instructed to cover his eyes so he could not see the land from which he would be exiled (vss. 4-6). In doing this, Ezekiel became an action-sign "to the Israelites."

After Ezekiel did everything he was instructed to do, the following morning God asked the prophet if the rebellious exiles had asked, "What are you doing?" (vss. 7-9). Apparently the action-sign had

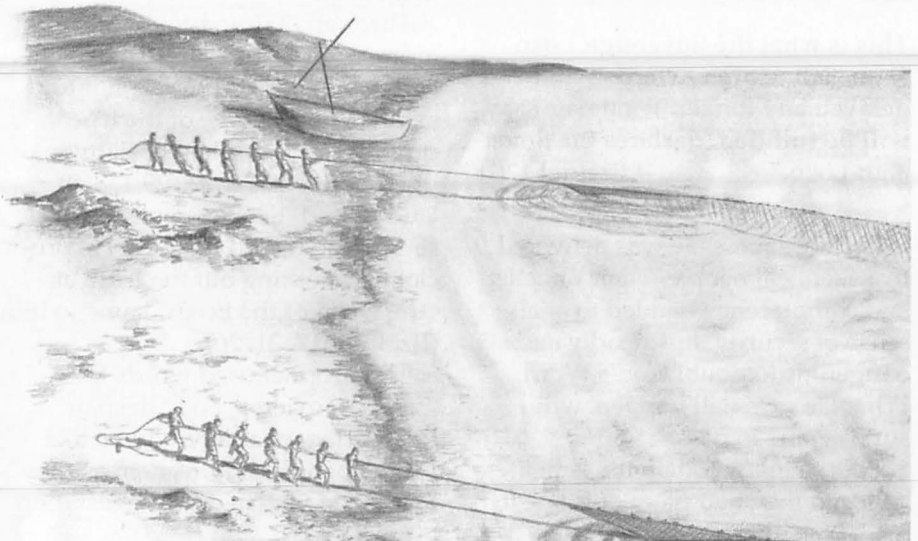
caused some curiosity. It was just the opening Ezekiel needed to deliver God's explanation of the sign's meaning.

The daylight performance of the action-sign revealed that King Zedekiah ("the prince in Jerusalem") and the people living in Jerusalem ("all the Israelites who are there") would shortly "go into exile as captives" (vss. 10, 11). The evening part of the sign was a portrayal of Zedekiah's futile attempt to escape through the walls of Jerusalem. The escape would fail because in His divine judgment, God would ensure the king's capture and deportation to Babylon where he would be

blinded and eventually die. Furthermore, members of the king's staff and army who tried to escape with him would be killed by the Babylonian invaders (vss. 12-14).

Ezekiel's graphic portrayal of future events was accurately fulfilled down to the last detail in 586 B.C. During the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, Zedekiah tried to escape, was captured, and forced to watch as enemy soldiers slaughtered his sons. It was the last thing he would see, for his eyes were gouged out and he was led captive to Babylon where he died in prison (see 2 Kings 25:1-7; Jer. 52:4-11). The king's subjects, the few whom God would

The Lord said He would spread a net for Zedekiah and would catch the king in His snare (Ezek. 12:13). Illustrated below are some fishermen using a dragnet to snare scores of fish. In Bible times, nets were also spread on the land to snare birds and other animals.



spare "from the sword, famine and plague," would certainly come to recognize God's sovereignty (Ezek. 12:15, 16). But the lesson would be learned only after captives were scattered throughout the nations.

Many Christians today are like the Israelites during Ezekiel's time. They persist in their disobedience until God is forced to discipline their sin. The Lord's desire is to guide His children with a tender loving hand. Unfortunately, too many of His children insist upon doing things "the hard way." Many have to be knocked flat on their backs by divine discipline before they will look up to God for direction in their lives.



Israel's Judgment Guaranteed (12:17-28)

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "None of my words will be delayed any longer; whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the Sovereign LORD."

—Ezekiel 12:28

Ezekiel's message was delivered to a skeptical people. Their unbelief and complacency had led to a false sense of security. It is deadly and dangerous to doubt God's Word. What He says will happen, will surely come to pass.

Like so many today, the Israelites believed they had plenty of time to

get right with God. But less than six years later, Jerusalem was leveled to the ground and the people were led away captive to Babylon. Like Ezekiel, Jesus issued the solemn warning, "You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Luke 12:40). As the fate of the Jews in Jerusalem shows, putting off a response to God's call to repentance can be spiritually fatal.

As a warning to the people of the approaching destruction and bondage, Ezekiel was instructed to act out a second sign involving eating his meals in fear and trembling (Ezek. 12:17-18). The sign was needed because both Ezekiel and Jeremiah had been prophesying for so many years and yet nothing had happened. Aided by the lies of false prophets, the people were beginning to have serious doubts that they were in any danger of divine judgment at all.

Through "false visions" and "flattering divinations," false prophets had convinced the people not to believe the message of the true prophets in Jerusalem or Babylon (see Jer. 28:1-4, 15; 29:1, 8, 9). Undaunted, Ezekiel persisted in setting the record straight. He proclaimed nothing but the truth as "the word of the LORD" came to him (Ezek. 12:17, 21, 26).

The prophet used words like "fear," "anxiety," and "despair" to describe what it would be like for the people of Jerusalem as they helplessly watched the devastation

and destruction brought upon their city. The land would be destroyed because of God's judgment. But it was the violence of the people themselves that caused them to deserve that judgment (vss. 19, 20).

While the people may have doubted that divine judgment was imminent, the prophet delivered five messages from God that clearly stated otherwise. The five messages on the certainty of coming judgment

This painting shows the Babylonians leading the people into exile out of a burning Jerusalem.



are given as follows: (1) 12:21-25; (2) 12:26-28; (3) chapter 13; (4) 14:1-11; and (5) 14:12-23.

The first message took issue with a popular proverb that was circulating in Israel. It said, "The days go by and every vision comes to nothing" (12:22). Its meaning was that none of the bad things God's prophets were saying would really happen. The prophets, in other words, were nothing more than alarmists who should be ignored.

The Destruction of God's City

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-100) gave this account of the utter destruction of Jerusalem witnessed by those who lived in the city:

"And now it was that the king of Babylon sent Nebuzaradan, the general of his army, to Jerusalem, to pillage the temple; who had it also in command to burn it and the royal palace, and to lay the city even with the ground, and to transplant the people to Babylon. Accordingly he came to Jerusalem, in the eleventh year of king Zedekiah, and pillaged the temple, and carried out the vessels of God, . . . and when he had carried these off, he set fire to the temple . . . he also burnt the palace, and overthrew the city . . . to the very foundations" (*The Antiquities of the Jews* 10.8.5)

Many modern Christians know what it feels like to be ignored by the world. Christians have warned unbelievers about the second coming of Christ for centuries, but many

have paid no heed. Certainly, many reason, no intelligent and open-minded person would believe such nonsense. And so the warnings are dismissed.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who do I know who is indifferent to the claims of God? How could I reach out to this person?*

The Sovereign Lord of the universe promised to put an end to the proverb and the smug attitude of disbelief and defiance of those who believed the lies of false prophets (vss. 23a, 24). God assured Ezekiel that the day was near at hand when "every vision will be fulfilled" completely and without delay (vss. 23b, 25, 28).

Ezekiel's second message was a continuation of what was stated in the first one. While the proverb denied even the fact of coming judgment, here God represented "the Israelites" as doubting that judgment would take place anytime soon (vss. 26-28). Apparently, even those who did not entirely dismiss

the prophets' message refused to believe that their predictions would be fulfilled in the near future.

The apostle Peter warned that the same attitude would exist before Christ's return. He wrote, "in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'" (2 Pet. 3:3, 4).

Once again, God assured Ezekiel that judgment would not be delayed. And for Israel then, as for peoples of all ages, He made one thing crystal clear: "Whatever I say will be fulfilled" (Ezek. 12:28b, 25b). The divine message to Ezekiel and Christians today is that God's Word cannot and will not fail.

3

False Prophets and Idolatrous Elders

Ezekiel 13—17

a False Prophets Denounced (13:1-16)

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!" —Ezekiel 13:3

The task of the prophets was seldom a pleasant one. The messages they were called to deliver were usually unpopular and unwelcomed by the recipients. Warnings

of catastrophes of all kinds were most often heard from a prophet's lips first.

As if that were not bad enough, their job was made even more difficult by the plague of false prophets that infected Israel. Like weeds they popped up in the Holy Land falsely proclaiming, as did Hananiah, "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says" (Jer. 28:2).

Unlike the true prophets of God, false prophets were only interested in gaining favor with the people by telling them what they wanted to hear—whether it was true or

Wolves in Sheepskins

Essentially two types of false prophets were at work in Israel.

There were those who represented false gods, like Baal or Molech. Elijah contended with this type of prophet on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:19-40).

The second class of false prophets claimed to represent the true God of Israel when in fact they did not. The prophets of Ahab who opposed the true prophet Micaiah are representative of this group (1 Kings 22:5-28). These false prophets were thoroughly condemned by Jeremiah, who contended with them on moral, political, and personal grounds (Jer. 23:9-32).



not. Every generation has its "false prophets." God's people should shun anyone who attempts to pull them away from Him by distorting the truth for personal gain or popularity.

Ezekiel had already delivered two messages on the certainty of God's judgment (see Ezek. 12:21-25, 26-28). In chapter 13, the prophet delivered a third message on the same general subject. But this time, popular proverbs and sayings were not the focus. Ezekiel's words were directed toward the prophets, prophetesses, and leading elders who were causing the people to question God's words of warning to Israel.

False prophets and prophetesses were giving the people unrealistic optimism and hope about the future. Satan seldom misses an opportunity to contradict God's truth with a lie. In Ezekiel's day, the false prophets were willing accomplices in helping Satan to fulfill this task.

In His message to Ezekiel, God informed him that the source of the false prophets' words was "their own imagination" (vss. 1-2). These foolish individuals were following "their own spirit" rather than the Spirit of God and therefore had not received any visions from God (vs. 3, see vs. 17). They had no divine authority whatsoever. Thus Ezekiel was commanded to denounce these lying prophets before the people.

Not only were the false prophets telling lies, their duplicities were misleading and spiritually dangerous. They were "like jackals among

ruins" (vs. 4). The point apparently, was that just as jackals found physical ruins to be acceptable places to live, false prophets found a society in spiritual ruins a suitable marketplace for peddling their empty prophecies. Unfortunately there are many today who call themselves "ministers of the gospel," who seem more concerned about profit and popularity than they do about lost souls in a decaying culture.

Ask Yourself . . . *What kind of questions would I ask of a ministry before donating money to it?*

The spiritual and moral life of Israel was like a crumbling wall that was near collapse. But the false prophets did nothing to help repair the wall. They did nothing to ensure that Israel would be able to "stand firm in the battle on the day of the LORD" (vs. 5). While the expression, "day of the LORD," usually refers to the end times in Scripture, here it more likely signified the coming Babylonian invasion.

God flatly denied that the false prophets spoke for Him and pointedly denounced their bogus visions and lying divinations. On these grounds, He said the lying prophets would receive a threefold judgment. First, their position of favor and influence in Israel as members of the "council of [God's] people" would be over when their prophecies failed. Second, they would be excluded from the record of Israelite citizens. In short, they were being ejected from the community of Israel. And finally, they would

not return from exile to the land of Israel. They would die in captivity (vss. 6-9)

The biggest lie the false prophets told the people was that the future held peace. To make things worse, they preached alongside Ezekiel who was conveying a message of coming death, hunger, and disease (vss. 10a, 16). The lying words of the false prophets were likened to a “flimsy wall” covered “with whitewash” (vs. 10b). While Ezekiel was warning the people that the wall of moral and spiritual life constructed by God for their protection was on the verge of disintegration, the false prophets were merely applying plaster to hide the moral cracks and spiritual decay.

Courageously facing moral and spiritual problems can be difficult and unpleasant. But simply pretending that they are not there can rob a believer of joy, peace, power in prayer, and fellowship with the Lord. Furthermore, it may lead to divine discipline. By the help of the Holy Spirit, we must repair the cracks in our spiritual lives and refuse to gloss them over.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I expose or whitewash cracks in my spiritual development?*

God symbolically informed the false prophets that He was sending the Babylonian army against the flimsy wall of Israel like torrential rain, “hailstones,” and “violent wind” (vss. 11b, 13). When this happened, the wall would collapse, and they would be blamed for it (vss.

11a, 12, 14a). The people would call the false prophets to explain what had happened to their phony prophecies of peace. In the end, the false prophets would be destroyed because God’s wrath was against both them and His wayward people who had believed their lies (vss. 14b-16).

In imagery similar to Ezekiel’s, Jesus warned His followers about religious charlatans. He compared the Pharisees and “teachers of the law” in His day to “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matt. 23:27). Believers should be ever vigilant in testing the claims of those who say they represent God. As the Bereans tested Paul’s teaching, we also should examine Scripture carefully to see if their words are true (see Acts 17:11).

b False Prophetesses Condemned (13:17-23)

“Son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination. Prophesy against them.”

—Ezekiel 13:17

Ezekiel dealt with the false prophets as God instructed. Now his attention was directed toward the false prophetesses who were leading

God's people astray. Like their male counterparts, these women were not prophesying God's Word, but lies that were figments of their own imaginations.

These women were willing participants in evil. Like fortunetellers, psychics, and spiritualists today, they made a profit by preying on people's curiosity and fears. But instead of gazing into crystal balls, reading palms or tarot cards, they captured the people's attention with "magic charms" and "veils of various lengths" (vss. 17, 18).

The precise nature of the magic arts these sorceresses employed is not known. This is the only place in Scripture where the Hebrew word for "magic charms" is used (vss. 18, 20). Their practices may have originated in Babylon where knots and bands, thought to have magical properties, were tied to the body. Such good luck charms were believed to protect the wearer from evil spirits and disease. The head veils were of different lengths, depending on the height of the wearer, and were apparently intended only to suggest an air of mystery about the sorceress.

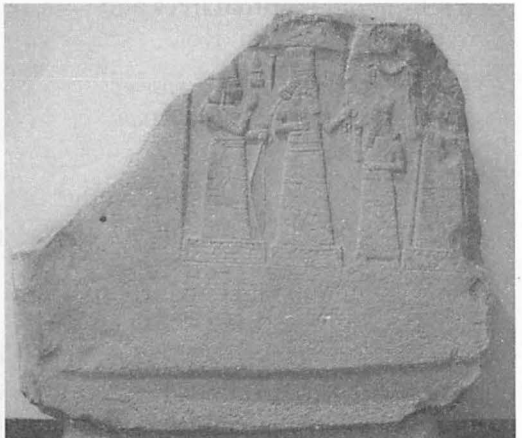
These gimmicks worked for they did indeed ensnare the Israelites. Like people in all ages who live in uncertain times, those who were fearful and easily deceived willingly paid the price for anything purporting to guarantee protection and good fortune. For the Israelites, a magic charm could be purchased or the future foretold for "handfuls of barley and scraps

of bread" (vs. 19).

While the price for false hope and future security was indeed cheap in Israel, the cost for genuine hope and eternal security with God is free. This free gift of eternal life, made possible by the death of God's Son on the cross, brought inestimable honor to the Father. By contrast, the false prophetesses of Israel profaned God's name among His people by employing it in their perverted practices. Instead of bringing life to the people, their evil arts were destroying them.

God pronounced His judgment upon the false prophetesses. He would strip them of their occultic

Ezekiel accused the people of having "idols in their hearts" (Ezek. 14:3-4). On this stele a Babylonian governor prays to two Babylonian gods—Adad, god of weather, who has a lightning bolt in each hand, and Ishtar, goddess of fertility and war. The Jews would have been tempted to worship such idols while in exile in Babylon.



powers and free His people from their magic spells and evil influence (vss. 20, 21). No longer would God's people be held captive like birds in a snare.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I sense any spiritual bondage in my life?*

The reason for divine judgment was clearly explained. These prophetesses had disheartened the righteous with their lies. Furthermore, they had encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways so that they might live (vs. 22). The aims of the sorceresses for the people of Israel were directly the opposite of God's purposes for them. Consequently, when their magic arts were taken away from them, the sorceresses would know in truth that they had encountered the Lord God of Israel (vs. 23).

C **Idoltrous Elders Repudiated (14:1-11)**

"Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?" —Ezekiel 14:3

In this section, Ezekiel delivered a fourth message from God on the certainty of coming judgment upon His people. The focus here is idolatry, already identified as the primary reason for God's judgment.

It is easy for some Christians today to criticize the Israelites for worshiping idols instead of the true God. However, idolatry still exists today—it even tempts some believers. Instead of idols made of wood and stone, modern idols may be things like wealth, power, or the pursuit of pleasure. An idol is anything that takes God's place in our heart or supplants the Lord as the ultimate source of security.

The elders of Israel, who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the Israelites in exile, went to Ezekiel to inquire about the future (vs. 1). Perhaps they were looking for clarification from God about Jerusalem's future and how long the exiles would remain in captivity. Their inquiry may have been prompted by confusion over Ezekiel's denunciation of the false prophets and their rosy message of future peace for Israel. Whatever the elders' motives in going to Ezekiel were, God's message through the prophet was undoubtedly not what they expected or wanted to hear.

First, God repudiated these elders for worshiping idols in their hearts and for causing the people to fall because of their idolatry. Then He made it clear that He would not answer their questions as if they were people who acknowledged His sovereignty in their lives and worshiped Him accordingly. Instead, He would address them and all Israel as the great idolaters that they were in order to turn the hearts of the people back to Him (vss. 2-5).

THE HEART

OF THE MATTER

Ezekiel rebuked those Israelites who had set up idols in their hearts (Ezek. 14:4). Together, the Greek and Hebrew words for "heart" are used over 900 times in Scripture. In all these references, only a few describe the physical organ that pumps blood. Almost always the heart is presented in the Bible as the symbolic seat of human intellect, emotions, or will. As such, it is regarded as the source of an individual's spiritual life.

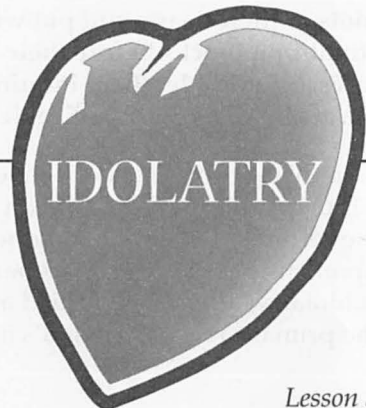
Often, the condition of the "heart" is used to describe the true character of an individual. For example the heart is described as stubborn and evil (Jer. 3:17), pure (Matt. 5:8), or rebellious (Jer. 5:23). Because a person's words and deeds come from the heart, above all else, it should be guarded well (Prov. 4:23; Matt. 15:18, 19). But the greatest responsibility of humankind, according to Scripture, is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Matt. 22:37).

Outwardly, the elders and the people appeared religious as they offered sacrifices and performed the prescribed Jewish rites. But inwardly, their hearts were not right with God. They were trying to worship Jehovah along with the other gods worshiped in the pagan cultures around them. For this reason, the nation was destined for destruction.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do my outward actions square up with what is in my heart?*

God called for His people to repent. In Scripture, the basic idea in repentance is to change one's mind about something. It involves seeing things from God's point of view rather than from the sinful perspective of the world. In the New Testament particularly, the act of repenting includes the concept of changing the direction of one's life. In repentance, sinners do two things. Negatively, they turn away from sin. Positively, they turn toward God in faith.

Here, God wanted His people to change their minds about the evil character of idolatry and to adopt His view of its destructive nature. He wanted His children to "Turn from [their] idols and renounce all [their] detestable practices," and come back to Him (vss. 6, 11). If Israel failed to repent, only dire consequences lay ahead for the nation.



Ezekiel revealed that if any Israelite or resident alien dared to make inquiry of God through a prophet while practicing idolatry in their hearts, God would answer them directly Himself. And the answer would be in actions, not words. As an example to the rest of Israel, the offender's deeds would become well-known and talked about by others. And ultimately, idolaters would be "cut off" from the people. As a result of God's judgment, they would be exiled from the community of God (vss. 7, 8).

God said He would not respond to an idolater's inquiries through a prophet. Thus any prophet who was persuaded to give an answer would have to be a false prophet. While the meaning is difficult here, the idea seems to be that God would use the deceptive words of a false prophet to bring judgment upon both the idolater and the false prophet himself (vss. 9-10). An example of this was God's use of false prophets to bring judgment upon wicked King Ahab (see 1 Kings 22:19-23).

By this means, God would destroy the idolatry that had brought destruction upon Israel. Once again, Israel would enjoy true fellowship with the Sovereign Lord who had established the nation in the first place (Ezek. 14:11).

God's judgments upon His people, though prompted by their rebellion and grievous sin, are always acts of mercy and intended to expose the need for reconciliation.

Ezekiel 14:12—17:24 in Brief

In response to Israel's idolatrous elders' anxious inquiry about the future of the nation, Ezekiel gave a clear and direct answer in his fifth message on the certainty of coming judgment. Even if such godly men as Noah, Daniel, and Job lived in a country dominated by persistent unfaithfulness, that country would be judged for its wickedness. God's righteousness required it and nothing could prevent it.

Ezekiel explained Jerusalem's condition in terms of a parable about a useless vine growing in the forest. Since the vine produced neither fruit nor wood out of which anything useful could be made, it was fit to be used only as firewood. In the same way, Jerusalem had become so corrupted by idolatry that it was no longer fit for anything but destruction.

To further explain the extent of Jerusalem's spiritual decline, Ezekiel portrayed Jerusalem allegorically as an unfaithful wife. The bride, dearly beloved by her husband, was treated like a queen and had every good thing lavished upon her. Yet she shamelessly prostituted herself to every man who came her way. For this, she had to be judged. But despite her infidelity, she would one day experience blessing and restoration to God's favor.

Ezekiel also told an allegory about two eagles. The first eagle was the

king of Babylon. The “topmost shoot” was Jehoiachin, king of Judah, who had been taken to Babylon six years earlier. The “seed of the land” was Zedekiah, who was installed as Nebuchadnezzar’s puppet king in Judah.

The second eagle was the king of Egypt, to whom Zedekiah turned for aid in his rebellion against Babylon. In his rebellion, Zedekiah

not only broke his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar, but with God as well. For this, it was prophesied that Zedekiah would be taken to Babylon where he would be punished and eventually die.

The “tender sprig,” which God Himself would plant, refers to Christ the Messiah. Through Him, Israel will one day be restored.

4

The Sour Grapes Parable

Ezekiel 18—24

a The Parable Stated (18:1-9)

"What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' "? —Ezekiel 18:2

The Israelites were quoting a proverb to justify blaming their current captive condition on the sins of their parents. Ezekiel revealed the fallacy of the Israelites' assumption by citing three hypothetical situations. The three cases, each beginning with the word "suppose," involved a righteous man who did what was just and right, the violent son of a righteous father, and the righteous son of a sinful father.

God explained through Ezekiel in chapter 18 that an individual's guilt or innocence before Him is a matter of personal conduct. Each individual decides whether to act righteously or wickedly and is judged by God on that basis alone.

The intent of the "sour grapes" proverb the Israelites were circulating in Jerusalem and Babylon was

to shift blame for their punishment in captivity from themselves to former generations (vs. 2; see also Jer. 31:29, 30). The proverb insinuated that God was unfairly punishing the captives. Granted, the effects of sin can indeed be cumulative (see Exod. 20:5, 6; Matt. 23:35, 36). The moral and spiritual decay of one generation may have profound, long-lasting effects upon those who follow. But "the word of the LORD" that came to Ezekiel revealed that each person is responsible for his or her own sin (Ezek. 18:1, 4).

Ask Yourself . . . *What kind of player am I in the "blame game"?*

Since God does not punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty, the Israelites' attempt to avoid guilt for their own idolatry and disobedience was rejected outright by God. He was offended by the peoples' presumptuousness in hiding behind this patently untrue notion. Therefore, "the Sovereign LORD" declared that this pet proverb of the exiles would be quoted in Israel no more (vss. 2, 3).

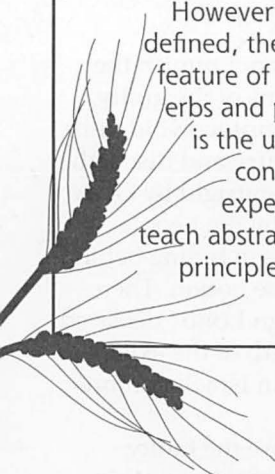
In order to expose the faulty reasoning of the Israelites on this issue, Ezekiel presented the first of

Proverbs and Parables

The Hebrew word for "proverb" signified a comparison of some sort, but it came to mean any wise or moralistic saying. The Greek word for "parable" conveyed the idea of placing two things "side by side" for the purpose of "comparison."

Proverbs are usually thought of as short, pithy sayings, while parables are extended stories. But the distinction is not hard and fast among biblical writers and in at least one place, the Greek word for parable is translated "proverb" (see Luke 4:23).

However they are defined, the essential feature of both proverbs and parables is the use of concrete life experiences to teach abstract spiritual principles.



three hypothetical situations involving three generations of the same family. He began with the case of a righteous man who lived justly and righteously and was fully obedient to God's law (vs. 5). The righteous man was described as one who did not practice idolatry or pagan practices of any kind. Furthermore, he was faithful to laws governing relationships with other Israelites (vs. 6). For example, he maintained sexual purity. This is probably a reference to the Mosaic law's prohibition against adultery, and having intercourse with a woman during her period of menstruation (see Exod. 20:14; Lev. 18:19).

Ezekiel described the righteous man as a person who refused to oppress anyone. He would not keep as collateral for a loan any item the borrower might require, such as a cloak needed for warmth at night (see Exod. 22:26). He would never steal from anyone (see Exod. 20:15). On the contrary, he gave food and clothing to the needy. This Israelite of exemplary character cared more about giving to others than receiving anything for himself (Ezek. 18:7).

In financial matters, if the righteous man made a loan to anyone, his dealings were fair (vs. 8a). He would not charge an exorbitant amount of interest, as the phrase "take a profit" implies. The Mosaic law allowed interest on loans to Gentiles, but not on those made to fellow Israelites (see Deut. 23:19, 20). Whether the hypothetical loan here was to a Gentile or an Israelite,

the righteous man's conduct was praiseworthy in either case. It was God's law that guided him in all his financial dealings, not the profit motive.

The righteous Israelite tried to do what was right and fair in every situation by faithfully following God's laws and decrees (Ezek. 18:8b, 9a). This man's outward actions revealed an inner character that was firmly based on his obedience to God. As a result of his righteousness, this man would "live" (vs. 9b), that is, He would not suffer judgment for the sins of others.



When the Israelites arrived in the land of Canaan, "mountain shrines" and "high places" were already there. Most often these places of worship were only altars for sacrifices, though a temple might also be included (see 2 Kings 23:8).

This "Great High Place" (pictured above) located at Petra in Jordan is carved out of solid rock and features two altars for sacrifices. The structure dates sometime between the second century B.C. and second century A.D. Ezekiel's righteous man and his righteous grandson had nothing to do with these places of idolatry (Ezek. 18:6, 15). The violent son, on the other hand, participated in the pagan rituals practiced at such sites (Ezek. 18:11).

b The Parable Refuted (18:10-18)

"Suppose [a righteous father] has a violent son, who sheds blood or does any of these other [sinful] things. . . . Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he is to be put to death; his blood will be on his own head."

—Ezekiel 18:10, 13bc

After the case of the righteous man was presented, Ezekiel set forth two more hypothetical cases to confirm the principle of individual

responsibility. The second case supposes that the righteous man had a "violent son." The unrighteous son not only committed all the sins his father had not committed, he was a murderer as well (vs. 10; compare vss. 11-13 with vss. 6-8).

God's judgment upon the wicked son was clear and decisive. He would surely be punished for his sin. The evil son would be put to death and "his blood will be on his own head" (vs. 13b). The son could derive no benefit from his father's righteous character and conduct.

Righteousness is not hereditary. It cannot be passed from parents to children like hair or eye color. Neither does the mere presence of righteous people cause their righteousness to rub off on those around them (see 14:12-20). Righteousness is a strictly individual matter involving one's own personal relationship with the Lord.

The third hypothetical case presented by Ezekiel involved a third generation. The righteous man's wicked son now had a son born to him. This son witnessed all the sins his father had committed (18:14). But instead of following in his father's evil footsteps, he followed the example of his righteous grandfather (compare vss. 15-17 with vss. 6-8 and 11b-13).

The conclusion, based on God's principle of individual responsibility, is inescapable. The last son will not die because of his father's sin; he will live. And he will live because of his own righteousness, not because of his grandfather's righteousness. The father too would receive the just consequences of his evil deeds. "His father will die for his own sin" (vss. 17b, 18).

The example of the conduct of three generations of a hypothetical family clearly showed that the

righteousness of a just individual was of no benefit to a sinful person. Conversely, it revealed that the sin of an unrighteous person could bring no judgment upon a righteous individual. Ezekiel's conclusion was evident. The Israelites were being judged for their own sins, not the sins of previous generations. Furthermore, only the Israelites who were obedient to God could expect to escape the judgment of the dark days ahead.

Ask Yourself . . . *How much of my spiritual condition do I attribute to the actions and attitudes of others?*



The Principle Explained (18:19-23)

"The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them."

—Ezekiel 18:20

Ezekiel anticipated that the Israelites might ask why the child did not share in the parents' guilt. The answer is a restatement of the principle of individual responsibility. Once more God repeated His verdict that the child would live because they did what was just and right,

What God Decrees



God commended the child who did what was just and right, who kept all His "decrees." In its basic form, a "decree" signified an official law, ruling, or declaration pertaining to a particular subject. The issuing of decrees is presented in Scripture as essentially the right of royalty. Instances are given, for example, of kings issuing decrees to govern special events or occasions (Esth. 1:20; Dan. 3:10; Jonah 3:7).

In the Old Testament, God is regarded as the "King of the earth" and as such is authorized to make decrees by which the natural world is ordered (Ps. 2:7; Dan. 4:24). There are, for example, divine decrees regarding the rain (Job 28:26) and the sea (Prov. 8:29). But the primary meaning of "decrees" in a theological sense has to do with God's divinely established plans and purposes for humankind (see Ps. 119:5, 8, 12; Ezek. 18:19-21).

and because they carefully obeyed all of God's "decrees." "The one who sins is the one who will die," because there is no transfer of righteousness or guilt between parent and child. God, through Ezekiel, made it clear that neither the parent nor the child bore any responsibility for the guilt of the other or derived any benefit from the righteousness of the other (vss. 19, 20).

In modern life, there is a strong tendency of human nature to blame others for anything bad that happens, but to take credit for anything good. In God's law court, however, everyone stands or falls on the basis of their own conduct and decisions. God is not swayed by excuses, buck passing, or blame shifting. While it

is certainly true that every believer has an obligation to share the gospel with the lost, in the end, all stand solely responsible for themselves before God.

Ask Yourself . . . *What kinds of things go through my mind when I think about God's great day of accountability?*

Ezekiel explained that it was possible to escape the coming Babylonian destruction through repentance. If the wicked turned from their disobedience and sin to a life of righteousness and obedience to God, then they would be delivered from God's judgment upon Israel. This was the principle. If the wicked turned from their evil to righteousness, they would live (vss. 21, 22).

But if the righteous abandoned their righteousness for evil, they would die (see vs. 24).

Why would God permit the wicked to avoid judgment by repenting of their disobedience? The pardon is a matter of God's mercy. It gives God no pleasure to punish people. God has no desire to get even with those who have ignored Him, sometimes for years. In His infinite love and boundless grace toward all humankind, the Lord desires that all should turn from their evil deeds to a life of righteous obedience to His commands (vs. 23).

In these verses, Ezekiel dealt with the temporal issue of life and death at the hands of the Babylonian army. But his words reflect the teaching of Scripture elsewhere concerning the weightier matter of eternal life and death. Peter said of the Lord, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).



The Principle Applied (18:24-32)

"You Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall." —Ezekiel 18:30

While it is certainly true that God forgives the sins of those who turn from evil to righteousness, He will

not ignore the sins of those who are walking in righteousness and then turn to evil. Those in Israel who chose this course would not live, nor would their past righteous deeds be remembered (vss. 24, 26). Former good deeds cannot be used like money to buy God's favor if we turn from righteous to evil conduct.

God's favor cannot be purchased, but His infinite love will move Him to forgive sinners who repent of their sin and turn back to Him (vss. 27, 28). Whether the death of the wicked is physical (temporal) or spiritual (eternal), God takes no pleasure in it. In the same way, we should never rejoice when the lost suffer misfortune—even those who have hurt us. Like the Lord, we should do everything possible to bring them to a saving knowledge of Him that results in eternal life.

If an Israelite who had formerly followed God's law eventually became unfaithful and practiced idolatry and other "detestable things," the past righteousness would not cancel out the current sin. A common misconception throughout the ages has been that on some divine scale people's good deeds are weighed against their bad deeds to determine their eternal destiny. But when judgment comes, it is an individual's relationship with the Lord that is the decisive factor, not good or bad deeds.

The Israelite response to God's judgment was to childishly accuse Him of being unfair and unjust. God responded that, on the contrary, it was Israel's ways that

were unjust, not His (vss. 25, 29).

The Israelites apparently held onto the same flawed notion that many do today. They mistakenly thought that it was God's responsibility to abide by their standard of justice, rather than their responsibility to abide by His. Instead of accepting God's law and earnestly trying to live by it without question or compromise, the people of Israel searched for escape clauses and loopholes in the law.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I often consider myself an exception to the rule?*

Through Ezekiel, the Lord repeated the principle that His judgment upon the "people of Israel" would be based on the sin of each individual. The current generation of idolatrous, disobedient Israelites would be responsible for the fall of the nation—not generations past. Thus the only hope of avoiding calamity was for the people to repent of their sin, and to allow the Holy Spirit to bring spiritual revival among them (vss. 30, 31).

The future of Israel and the fate of the people rested in the hands of each Israelite. Those who continued in sin and rebellion would die. Those who repented would live. Changed lives was Israel's only hope of escaping certain judgment. God longed to give His people a new heart and spirit that would result in renewed hope, purpose, and power in Israel. And only this would bring pleasure to the Lord (vs. 32).

But God's offer of grace was refused. Thus from the "princes of

Israel" to the beggar on the street, God's people were destined to feel His wrath.

Ezekiel 19—24 in Brief

Ezekiel lamented the fall of the Israelite kings. Judah, presented as a lioness, was the mother of great kings. But the once mighty line of David was gone. The lioness's first whelp, Jehoahaz, was taken to Egypt by Pharaoh Neco as a prisoner in 609 B.C. The second whelp, Jehoiachin, was taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C.

Ezekiel recounted the periods in Israel's history when the nation was preserved in spite of constant rebellion and unfaithfulness. In His sovereign grace, God promised future restoration for Israel. However, this would not occur before Judah experienced divine judgment. As God's sword of judgment, Babylon would destroy Jerusalem and strike down King Zedekiah as well as the Ammonites.

The reason for the judgment of Jerusalem is catalogued in the people's sin. These included idolatry, the shedding of blood, desecration of God's Sabbaths, immorality, and extortion, among others. But the furnace of God's wrath would refine all classes among God's wayward people.

Ezekiel related an allegory of two sisters. Oholah was Samaria, representing the northern kingdom of Israel, while Oholibah was Jerusalem, a representation of the southern kingdom of Judah. The unfaith-

fulness and punishment of both sisters is recounted in these verses.

Ezekiel presented the impending destruction of Jerusalem in a parable about a cooking pot being brought to the boiling point. On the very day the siege of Jerusalem began, the prophet's wife died. It was a heart-wrenching sign to the people of the

exile that their beloved Jerusalem would be taken away from them. The exiles would mourn profoundly but in silence over the loss of Jerusalem as Ezekiel was commanded to do over the loss of his wife. The prophet was not allowed to speak again until the refugees from Jerusalem arrived in Babylon.

5

Lamentation over Tyre

Ezekiel 25—28

Ezekiel 25—26 in Brief

The judgments against Judah's immediate neighbors had to be carried out before Israel's complete restoration could take place. The Ammonites and Moabites were racially linked with Judah, but were habitual enemies of the Jews (see Gen. 19:37-38; Isa. 15—16; Jer. 48:1—49:6). The Edomites were also historically antagonistic toward the Jews. These descendants of Esau would feel God's wrath for their crimes against His people (see Jer. 49:7-22). The Philistines too were a constant thorn in Israel's side (for example, see Exod. 13:17; Judg. 13—17).

The prophecy concerning the destruction of Tyre is given in chapter 26. Judgment was pronounced upon the Phoenician city-state of Tyre, first of all, because it rejoiced over Jerusalem's destruction. With that chief trading rival out of the way, Tyre expected to prosper. The second reason for Tyre's judgment was pride.

Tyre was actually a two-part city. One part rested on the mainland, while the second was an island for-

tress. Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to mainland Tyre for 13 years, finally destroying that portion of the city in 572 B.C. Not until 332 B.C. was the island portion of Tyre defeated after a six-month siege by Alexander the Great. In fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy, Alexander's men literally made the site of the old city a "bare rock" (Ezek. 26:14) by throwing its rubble into the sea to create a causeway to the island to conquer it.

a Tyre's Prideful Boast (27:1-11)

Say to Tyre, situated at the gateway to the sea, merchant of peoples on many coasts, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'You say, Tyre, 'I am perfect in beauty.'"

—Ezekiel 27:3

The Book of Ezekiel contains prophecies concerning the judgment of seven nations surrounding Israel. These included Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt (see chaps. 25—32). But perhaps the most dramatic of these

prophecies is that regarding the fall of Tyre. The destruction of Tyre was so thorough that it profoundly affected all who witnessed it.

Divine judgment against Gentile nations was not about petty quarrels Israel had with troublesome neighbors. Judgment came because these pagan nations completely rejected the one true God and held His plans and purposes for them, as well as Israel, in utter contempt. God's patience with disobedience is not without limits. Whether for nations or individuals, where there is no repentance, divine justice results in judgment of sin.

Ezekiel 27 contains the prophet's second lament over the fall of Tyre (the first lament is given in 26:17, 18). In this chapter, Tyre is compared to a massive ship. Its diverse army of mercenary soldiers is described, as well as its impressive list of commercial trading partners. The lament ends with the ship that is Tyre sinking into the sea under the weight of divine judgment as horrified witnesses view the spectacle in unbelief.

The funeral song Ezekiel was directed to recite over Tyre focused on that nation's status as a major seaport and center of commerce in the ancient world (27:1-3). Tyre's boast, "I am perfect in beauty," suggests that pride was a major reason for the nation's judgment. God is the source of "every good and perfect gift" (Jas. 1:17). Tyre's denial of that truth while taking full credit for its own success, was an affront to the goodness and grace of God.

Prideful boasting and bragging about one's successes and accomplishments is evil (see Jas. 4:13-17). God condemns no one for taking honest pride and pleasure in doing

The Funeral Dirge

A lament or dirge was a kind of eulogy in song performed at funerals. The Book of Ezekiel contains five laments. Two of these were for "the princes of Israel" (19:1-14) and for the nation of Egypt (32:1-16). Three laments were for Tyre (26:17, 18; 27; 28:11-19).

Usually included in a lament was a recitation of the deceased's good qualities and an expression of the great sorrow and sense of loss felt over their death. King David mourned the deaths of Saul and Jonathan with a lament (2 Sam. 1:17-27). The whole Book of Lamentations is a series of laments over the pending destruction of Jerusalem by its enemies.

something well, providing the individual recognizes that the Lord is both the source of life and every good thing it offers. What God certainly objects to is the kind of puffed up pride that results in arrogance or inflated self-importance, especially when it devalues the worth of others.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I used my skills and abilities to build others up?*

In the imagery of building a beautiful ship, Ezekiel revealed that Tyre was a nation constructed of the finest materials available (Ezek. 27:4). Four kinds of premium woods were used to build the Tyrian state. Its timbers (perhaps symbolizing the hull) were fashioned from the pine trees of Senir (the Amorite name for Mt. Hermon). Its mast was a Lebanon cedar (vs. 5). The cedars of Lebanon were prized for their legendary strength and height.

The ship's oars were formed from solid oak, imported from the famous oak forests of Bashan located northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The deck of the ship was crafted from cypress trees from the island of Cyprus and inlaid with ivory (vs. 6). Ivory was usually imported from India.

The material for the sail of the Tyrian ship came from Egypt, famous for its exceptional linen cloth (vs. 7). The blue and purple "awnings" which came from the "coasts of Elishah," were perhaps intended to provide crew members with a measure of protection from inclement weather. The location of Elishah is unknown, but it could

probably be identified with Cyprus.

Ezekiel portrayed the crew members of the ship of Tyre as the best that money could buy. They came from the city of Sidon, a Phoenician seaport 20 miles north of Tyre, and Arvad, an island city off the coast of Syria (vs. 8). Both cities were important commercial shipping centers.

The ship's crew included highly skilled "shipwrights" from Gebal, expert builders who had helped build Solomon's temple (see 1 Kings 5:18). Gebal is identified with modern Jebeil located on the coast of Syria (Ezek. 27:9a). The seams of wooden ships were caulked with pitch to make them watertight. But the pitching and rolling motion of a sea-going vessel caused caulking material to loosen or break up and thus made repairs necessary while a ship was underway.

In sum, the Tyrian ship was described by Ezekiel as the premier vessel on the sea (vs. 9b). It was sought out by all the other ships and their crews. Everyone wanted to do business with the ship whose beauty had been brought to perfection. But the lesson Tyre refused to learn is that popularity brings transitory happiness, a false sense of security, and provides no protection against disaster.

Ezekiel turned his attention next to a description of the military might of Tyre (vss. 10, 11). As with the building materials that went into the city itself, Tyre boasted the best mercenary army money could buy. The defenders of Tyre brought

"splendor" and "beauty" to the city by hanging their armor on its walls. These "soldiers of fortune" came from Persia (modern Iran), Lydia (on the west coast of Asia Minor), and Put (modern Libya).

Other mercenaries were recruited from Arvad, Helech, and Gammad. While the location of Gammad is unknown, Helech was the name given to the region in southeastern Asia Minor known centuries later as Cilicia. In 100 B.C., Cilicia was made a Roman province. One of the chief cities of that province was Tarsus, birthplace of the apostle Paul.



Tyre's Commercial Greatness (27:12-25)

**"In your marketplace [many nations] traded with you beautiful garments, blue fabric, embroidered work and multicolored rugs with cords twisted and tightly knotted."
—Ezekiel 27:24**

The locations and number of Tyre's commercial clients, approximately two dozen in all, suggests commerce that covered most of the eastern Mediterranean region. The catalog of trade items reveals traffic in a wide variety of the most valuable commodities available in that part of the world. The city of Tyre was as rich as it was beautiful. But as the fate of Tyre teaches, wealth

and beauty cannot guarantee future happiness.

Trade between Tyre and other nations was of such great volume that it required "ships of Tarshish." Ezekiel gave a sampling of the kinds of cargo carried by these ships. This included but was not limited to metals such as silver, iron, tin, and lead (vss. 12, 25).

Among those who traded with Tyre were Greece, Tubal, and Meshech (vs. 13). Both Tubal and Meshech were located in Asia Minor, the western portion of modern Turkey. While all three nations traded in bronze, Greece is described as a slave trader as well. In the Book of Joel, Tyre and Sidon are accused of selling the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks (see Joel 3:4-6).

The exchange commodity of Beth Togarmah was work and war horses, as well as mules (Ezek. 27:14). Beth Togarmah probably refers to modern Armenia. The Armenians are a people of the Taurus mountain country with a long history of expertise in horse breeding and horsemanship.

The "men of Rhodes," from the modern Greek island of that name, traded ivory elephant tusks and ebony with Tyre (vs. 15). Ebony is a hard, durable black wood that polishes to a glistening shine. Both ivory and ebony have long been produced in India and Ethiopia.

Aram, modern Syria, also exchanged several commodities with Tyre (vs. 16). Among these was the high quality linen cloth known

A Balm in Gilead



Tyre traded honey and oil with Judah and Israel (Ezek. 27:17). In addition to their value as food, both honey and olive oil were also put to medical uses. Olive oil was commonly poured on open injuries and burns. Occasionally olive oil and honey were mixed as an ointment for wounds.

Balm too was believed to have therapeutic value. The balm mentioned by Ezekiel was most likely the aromatic resin obtained from a small tree, perhaps the balsam or storax tree. The best known source of the balm exported from ancient Palestine was

Gilead, east of the Jordan River (see Gen. 37:25; Jer. 8:22; 46:11; 51:8).

as Syrian byssus. Linen was a material woven from the fiber of flax, a plant with a slender stalk and blue flowers. Flax is perhaps the most ancient textile fiber (see Exod. 9:31).

Tyre's commercial partners included Judah and Israel (Ezek. 27:17). They traded wheat from Min-nith, located in Ammon (see Judg. 11:33), and a kind of confection made from honey. They also traded honey, olive oil, and balm. All three of these were thought to have some medical benefit. But the only healing remedy Israel so desperately needed to heal its "sin sick soul" was the blessing the Lord would pour out upon the nation's wounds if only the people would repent of their sins.

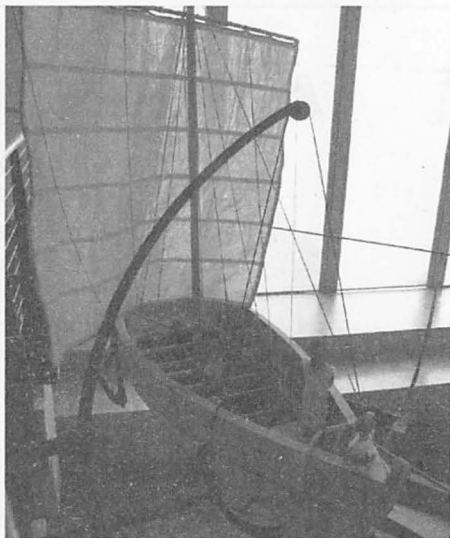
Ask Yourself . . . *Do I have any spiritual or emotional wounds that need the Lord's healing balm?*

Damascus supplied Tyre with wine and wool, while "Izal" (modern Yemen) exchanged "wrought iron, cassia and calamus" (Ezek. 27:18-19). Cassia was a kind of aromatic bark related to cinnamon. Calamus was a type of fragrant ginger grass used as a spice.

Arabia was the source of several of Tyre's commercial trading partners (vss. 20-22). Dedan, for example, was a supplier of "saddle blankets," considered a luxury item. Arabia, along with Kedar, probably a nomadic tribe, conducted their business in lambs, rams and goats

(see Gen. 25:13). Two other Tyrean customers, Sheba and Raamah, were located in southern Arabia. Their trading goods consisted of gold, spices, and precious stones.

All of the towns mentioned in Ezekiel 27:23 were located in Mesopotamia. The description of the products from that region suggests a strong textile industry flourished there (vs. 24). But these goods and all the others, according to Ezekiel, would perish when the “ships of Tarshish” were torn apart by the treacherous waves of God’s divine judgment (vs. 25).



Tyre depended upon “the ships of Tarshish” for its trade (Ezek. 27:25). Some have thought that “Tarshish” was a place. But the name could also simply be a reference to a very large type of cargo ship, perhaps like the one pictured above. King Solomon had a fleet “of trading ships” (in Hebrew, “of ships of Tarshish”), which took three years to make a round trip from Ezion Geber through the Red Sea to India (1 Kings 10:22).

C Tyre’s Total Destruction (27:26-36)

“Your wealth, merchandise and wares, your mariners, sailors and shipwrights, your merchants and all your soldiers, and everyone else on board will sink into the heart of the sea on the day of your shipwreck.”
—Ezekiel 27:27

Ezekiel had described the beauty of a ship that represented Tyre. He had described the unsurpassed success of Tyre’s maritime enterprises. Now with the conclusion of his lament, the prophet described the disastrous sinking of the ship, the complete ruin of the kingdom of Tyre.

Catastrophe would strike Tyre on “the high seas,” the very place

where the city had gained its wealth, power, and reputation. There, the east wind would break the city to pieces “far out at sea” (vs. 26).

Quite often human ruin comes at the hands of the things people love best and are most devoted to. For example, we can be dominated by our job, misguided by the wrong kind of friends, or overcome by addictive substances and practices.

If God is not at the focus of our efforts and devotion, our lives can end up battered and broken by the pounding waves of decisions that did not honor God.

Most ships in Bible times attempted to avoid severe storms by sailing close to shore. Paul's experience in Acts 27 reveals that sea travel on the Mediterranean during fall and winter could be unpredictable and extremely dangerous. Since the Mediterranean Sea lies to the west of Palestine, a hard wind from the east or northeast could blow a ship out into the ocean where destruction was virtually guaranteed.

In Tyre's case, the "ship" deliberately left the safety of the coastline to engage in commerce on the high seas. The island kingdom's decision proved fatal. Like a violent storm from the northeast, the Babylonian army blew in with devastating force. The "ship" went down with all of its wealth and people on board. Everything and everyone was lost (Ezek. 27:27).

In its pride, Tyre rejected the safety of God's sovereign direction and sailed away from His purpose for the nation. In His judgment, God sent a storm from out of the east to punish Tyrian arrogance and defiance. The divine punishment of Tyre was so severe and startling that it caused surrounding countries, the "shorelands," to "quake" when the sailors of Tyre cried out as their ship broke apart and sank into the bowels of the sea (vs. 28).

When Tyre's neighbors witnessed the destruction of the city, they would show their anguish through actions meant to convey the deepest sense of personal loss (vss. 29-31). As these onlookers cried out bitterly they would "sprinkle dust on their heads and roll in ashes." They would "shave their heads" and wear the coarse material called "sackcloth" next to their skin.

In their mourning, Tyre's former trading partners would lament that no place was ever silenced as thoroughly as this city "surrounded by the sea" (vs. 32). The nations who were once enriched by their commerce with the city, would be appalled at its disastrous disappearance into the "depths of the waters" (vss. 33-35a). Tyre's loss would be deeply felt.

As we look at Ezekiel's prophecy about Tyre's future, we see that the real tragedy is that Tyre's neighbors were mourning for the wrong reason. A major source of their enrichment was cut off. Their stock market had crashed; their profit margin was severely reduced. They cared nothing for Tyre's spiritual condition, or even the loss of lives on the island state. It was nothing personal, just business.

Ask Yourself . . . *How am I affected by the spiritual deterioration of others?*

Tyre's demise would not be deeply felt solely because of the great wealth the city generated. There was another reason why the kings who traded with Tyre "shudder[ed] with horror" and looked on with faces

"distorted with fear" (vs. 35b). Tyre was regarded as almost beyond conquest because of its defensive position in the sea. So if Tyre could be destroyed by the Babylonians, what chance did other kingdoms have of withstanding the might of this ruthless nation?

Ezekiel indicated that merchants would "scoff" at Tyre because of its catastrophic end (vs. 36). That is the most likely meaning here. The merchants who traded with Tyre would be utterly amazed to see the seemingly impregnable city of Tyre come to such a horrific end.

Ezekiel 28 in Brief

Ezekiel's previous prophecies had focused on the city of Tyre itself. But here the focus is on the city's leader. Because of the great pride of the king of Tyre, at this time either Ithobaal II or Ithobaal III, the monarch's fall was predicted. Believing his island city to be impregnable,

the king virtually set himself up as an invincible god. But God declared that this pagan king, like Tyre itself, would be brought "down to the pit" to the place of the dead.

The lamentation over the king of Tyre poses some problem for interpreters. The supernatural language used is considered by some to be a lofty, idealized description of the earthly king of Tyre. But others believe this passage is really about Satan, the true "king" of Tyre, the one who motivated the pride and claims of deity by Tyrean monarchs.

Ezekiel predicted the overthrow of Sidon, Tyre's neighboring city about 20 miles to the north. Sidon was taken by Nebuchadnezzar at the same time he conquered mainland Tyre. Ezekiel concluded this prophecy by saying that when the neighboring enemies of Israel have been destroyed, then Israel will be restored and live safely in the land God has given to them.



Lamentation over Egypt

Ezekiel 29—32

Ezekiel 29—31 in Brief

Ezekiel 29—32 contains seven prophecy-visions regarding God's judgment of Egypt. The first vision took place just six months before Jerusalem fell, some 15 years before Egypt was invaded by Nebuchadnezzar. In this vision, Ezekiel indicated that the time of Egypt's captivity and desolation would be 40 years. That was approximately the length of time between Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt and the rise of Persia.

The second vision is dated around 16 years after the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel pointed out in this vision that Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Tyre was rewarded with very few spoils. But when Babylon got through with Egypt, it would be left with nothing. There would not even be an Egyptian "prince in the land" to rule over the ruin.

The third prophecy against Egypt, found in Ezekiel 30:1-19, is undated. It emphasized the destruction of Egypt and its allies by the Babylonian army. Ezekiel's date for the fourth vision placed it three months before the fall of Jerusalem. The statement, "I have broken the arm

of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (vs. 21) probably refers to the defeat of the Egyptian army (see Jer. 37:5-9).

The fifth prophecy is an allegorical representation of Pharaoh's fall. It was given to Ezekiel just one month before Jerusalem's destruction. Here the prophet used Assyria as an object lesson to Egypt. Once powerful and consumed with pride over its own greatness, Assyria had fallen to Babylon. Like Assyria, Egypt too would have its pride stripped away.

a God's Judgment on Pharaoh (32:1-10)

"I will cause many peoples to be appalled at you, and their kings will shudder with horror because of you when I brandish my sword before them. On the day of your downfall each of them will tremble every moment for his life."

—Ezekiel 32:10

Egypt is regarded as one of the greatest civilizations of the ancient world. Sadly, however, it is also

well known for its paganism and cruelty. Many slaves taken captive by the Egyptians were horribly mistreated, the Jews among them. Idolatry ran rampant in the land. Egyptians worshiped the sun and life-giving Nile River, as well as many animals like the scarab beetle, cow, crocodile, and others. Pharaoh himself was worshiped as divine. Thus the Egyptians gave credit for their success and prosperity to animals and a mere man rather than to the one true God.

Many modern nations have achieved great things. But those nations must never forget Who provided the resources and opportunities to achieve their greatness. When a people deny God the honor, reverence, and credit due Him, they place themselves in grave danger of divine judgment. In arrogance and pride, Egypt took this path and paid dearly for the mistake.

Ezekiel's sixth of seven prophecies against Egypt was delivered on March 3, 585 B.C. Just two months earlier, word of Jerusalem's destruction had reached the exiles in Babylon. With smoke from the charred ruins of Jerusalem barely cleared from the air, Ezekiel continued his prophecies about coming judgment upon Egypt.

Egypt's downfall was so certain, that God told Ezekiel to deliver a funeral song, "a lament concerning Pharaoh" (32:1, 2a). The prophet had already prepared funeral songs for Judah (19), the city of Tyre (26:17, 18; 27), and Tyre's king (28:11-19). In this lament for

Pharaoh Hophra, who was Egypt's king at the time, the monarch was compared to a "lion" because he was mighty in power "among the nations" (vs. 2b).

Ezekiel likened the Pharaoh with a Nile crocodile (Ezek. 32:2). Sobek, the fierce Egyptian crocodile god, was usually depicted with ram's horns and ostrich plumes. In Egyptian culture, Sobek was associated with the concept of order in the universe.



Pharaoh was also compared to a "monster in the seas" (vs. 2c). Thus the king of Egypt was feared both on the land as a "lion" and in the sea as a "monster." The "monster" in question is probably the Nile crocodile. The Egyptians worshiped the crocodile as a god, and its thrashing motions in a stream would certainly churn and muddy its waters. Pharaoh's attempt to usurp some of Babylon's power

was apparently having just such an unsettling influence upon the nations in the eastern Mediterranean world. In international affairs, Pharaoh was a troublemaker.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I usually respond to troublemakers?*

Ezekiel turned next to the extent of Pharaoh's judgment. In the words of a hunt, God told Pharaoh He would send the Babylonian army, to net him, haul him up, and cast him into an open field. There, the birds and beasts would "gorge themselves" on his carcass and the bodies of Pharaoh's slain soldiers (vss. 3, 4). If Pharaoh and the Egyptian people had a puffed up view of their power and influence among the nations of the earth, God saw otherwise. He painted a picture of mountains and valleys strewn with the remains of Egypt's dead (vss. 5, 6).

The language used to describe God's judgment of Pharaoh was perhaps intended to recall the judgments that led up to the exodus of Israel from Egypt. The term "flowing blood" recalled the first plague in which water was turned into blood (vs. 6; compare Exod. 7:20-24). The blotting out of the heavenly lights so that darkness would cover the land, sounded like the ninth plague of the Exodus (vss. 7, 8; compare Exod. 10:21-29).

People of other nations would be troubled and "appalled," said Ezekiel, to hear about Egypt's destruction (vss. 9-10). Kings would be horrified and tremble with fear when

they realized that if a world power like Egypt could be destroyed, there was little hope and no security for them. True hope and genuine security can be found only in the Lord.

Ezekiel prophesied that many evil nations would fall. All of them did fall according to God's divine decree. Scripture reveals that even the greatest of earthly rulers, like the ancient pharaohs, are answerable to God. Not even the mightiest of armies can withstand His power.



Babylon's Ruthless Invasion (32:11-16)

"I will cause your hordes to fall by the swords of mighty men—the most ruthless of all nations. They will shatter the pride of Egypt, and all her hordes will be overthrown."

—Ezekiel 32:12

In the previous section, Ezekiel's lament pictured the destruction of Egypt in figurative language. Here the language is plain and unadorned with poetic word pictures. The message from the "Sovereign LORD" was that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, would destroy Egypt.

God's message of judgment upon sin is always clear throughout Scripture. This truth is never sugar-coated or hidden. The Sovereign Lord's desire is that all should repent and live. But for those who refuse and continue in sin, judgment

MOURNING OVER EGYPT

Ezekiel spoke of female chanters who would lament over Egypt (Ezek. 32:16). Several prophets spoke of professional mourners who were hired to express sorrow during times of death and calamity (see Jer. 9:17, 18).

These were usually women who had mastered the art of wailing and weeping on command. Mourners often played flutes and beat their breasts as they lamented the departed with a loud, wavering cry.



and death is the inevitable consequence.

Such was the case with Pharaoh and the Egyptian people who persisted in their idolatry. Even after more than 400 years of association with the captive Israelites and exposure to the power of their God, the Egyptians remained committed to worshipping a human king and images of animals. The people had signed and sealed their own fate.

Ezekiel prophesied that Pharaoh's army would be obliterated by "the most ruthless of all nations."

Furthermore, Egypt's "pride" would be shattered, its "hordes" of people slaughtered, and its "cattle" destroyed (vss. 11-13). The destruction would be so thorough that Egypt's people and animals alike would feel the blows of Babylonian steel.

The prophet used the word "hordes" 14 times in chapters 30—32 to describe the people of Egypt. In this section alone, the word occurs three times (vss. 12, 16). Apparently, the Egyptians took some pride in their very large population.

Egypt was no small, poorly populated country. It had a robust population that had many impressive accomplishments to its credit. But an evil nation cannot find protection from God's judgment in large numbers or great achievements. Submission to the Lord's love and grace and complete obedience to His will are the only refuge from sin's destructive force.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I experienced God's protection recently?*

Pharaoh had been accused of "churning the water" and "muddying the streams" as he stirred up trouble among the nations (see vs. 2). But God would put an end to that when He brought destruction upon the land. With Egypt overthrown, the waters of international relations would be settled and the streams would flow smoothly once again. And in the process, the power of the

Lord would be revealed. According to Ezekiel, when Egypt fell, the "daughters of the nations" would "chant" a lament at the nation's funeral (vss. 14-16).



Egypt's Consignment to the Pit (32:17-25)

"Son of man, wail for the hordes of Egypt and consign to the earth below both her and the daughters of mighty nations, along with those who go down to the pit." —Ezekiel 32:18

In dating the last of his seven prophecies against Egypt, Ezekiel omitted the month. Scholars generally assume that the month was the same as the sixth prophecy (vs. 17; see vs. 1). Thus this "word of the LORD" probably came to the prophet on March 17, 585 B.C., just two weeks after the sixth prophecy.

If the dating of this oracle is a bit unclear, its content is not. Both Egypt and other "mighty nations" were being consigned "to the pit" (vs. 18). In the Old Testament, "the pit" was another term for "sheol" or the "grave," the place where all souls went immediately following death.

The Israelites clearly believed in an afterlife for both the righteous and the unrighteous. Death, however, was generally looked upon as

an event to be feared. While New Testament saints had some understanding of resurrection from the dead, in Old Testament times, the nether world was believed to be the permanent dwelling place of those who died. Not until Christ Himself rose from the dead did God's people come to fully appreciate the glorious hope that awaited them beyond the grave.

There was no such glorious hope for Egypt. Ezekiel's message to that nation was to expect plenty of company in the afterlife, and none of it good by Egyptian standards. The prophet's words are a reminder that all human efforts to prepare for life after death are foolish if they leave God out. The Lord alone is the one who holds the power of life and death in His hands and only He can bend the future to His will.

Ask Yourself . . . *What are my expectations about life beyond the grave?*

The Egyptians considered themselves to be a favored people. But according to Ezekiel, the nation would fall so far that its people would be "laid among the uncircumcised" (vs. 19). This phrase signified a shameful death of some kind, usually violent death at the hands of one's enemies. In each of the ten times Ezekiel used this phrase in chapter 32, he associated it with "those killed by the sword" (vss. 20, 21, 25; see vss. 26, 28-30, 32).

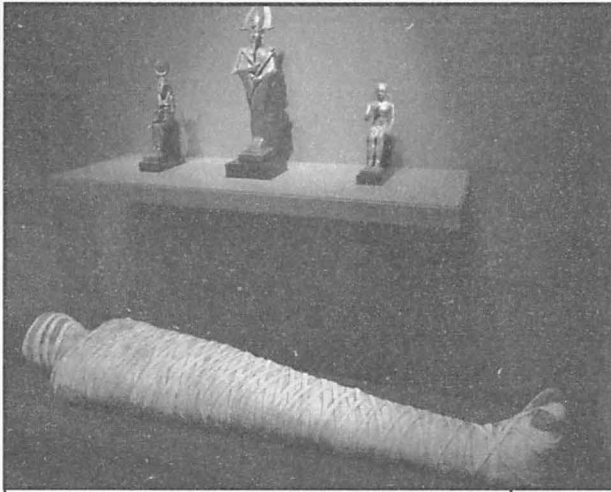
Ezekiel maintained that Egypt and its allies would be greeted in sheol with disdain by the "mighty leaders" already there. Once feared

by the nations of the known world, when Egypt went down to the pit it

would be just another fallen power shamed by defeat (vss. 20, 21). But

Egypt would not lack for company in the grave.

Seven nations, or groups of people, were described by Ezekiel as participants in the sheol welcoming committee for Egypt. These included Assyria (vss. 22, 23), and Elam (vss. 24, 25). Meshech and Tubal, Edom, "the princes of the north" and "the Sidonians" would also be there (see vs. 26-30).



The Egyptian Quest for **Immortality**

Despite Egyptian beliefs in elaborate underworlds, Ezekiel claimed that they would accompany their aggressive neighbors to the same realm of the dead (Ezek. 32:21). Because of their complex beliefs in the afterlife, the Egyptians became expert embalmers.

Pagan nations like Egypt could only grasp after eternal life. The great pyramids and the mummification of upper-class citizens bear testimony to the Egyptians' preoccupation with immortality and the life to come.

Ezekiel's description of the seven kingdoms had two key elements in common.

The first is that the people of each nation had "fallen" or were "killed" "by the sword." And second, all of the nations except Edom were charged with spreading "terror" during their time in power.

Assyria was said to be in sheol with its entire army (vss. 22, 23). While in the "land of the living," the Assyrians had "spread terror" with the sword. In a turn of divine justice, the Assyrian army had died "by the sword." Scripture contains many clear examples like this one of the truth that people do indeed reap what they sow.

Ezekiel named Elam as the second nation that would greet Egypt in sheol (vss. 24, 25).

This warlike country was located east of the Tigris River and north of the Persian Gulf (see Gen. 14:1-17). Elam was subjugated by both Assyria and Babylon, and later absorbed by the Persian Empire. The slain Elamite warriors of the past who had spread terror in the land of the living suffered the just consequences of their shameful acts when they went "down to the pit."



Pharaoh's Place among Godless Dead (32:26-32)

**"You too, Pharaoh, will be broken and will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword."
—Ezekiel 32:28**

As Ezekiel continued his catalog of nations Egypt would meet in the grave, he next named "Meshech and Tubal" (vs. 26, 27; see also 27:13; 38—39). These violent nations had struggled long and hard with the Assyrians for domination of the region that is now northeastern Turkey. The people of Meshech and Tubal were once fierce warriors who terrorized other nations. But in due course they suffered shameful defeat at the hands of their enemies and thus took their proper place among the other nations rightly judged for their sin.

Those who experienced the cruelty of the armies of Meshech, Tubal,

and the other barbaric nations Ezekiel described, no doubt cried out for justice and swift judgment upon their oppressors. But in most cases, it was decades or even centuries before judgment finally came. God's delay in punishing evil nations did not, and does not today, mean that He is insensitive to the cries of those who are suffering and oppressed. The Sovereign Lord has plans and purposes for all the peoples of the earth that have not been revealed to us. Justice will surely come, but at a time appointed by God that will further His divine purposes for all humankind.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I sometimes feel that God is too slow in judging cruelty in the world?*

In the middle of his listing of nations now in the grave, Ezekiel interjected a personal note to Pharaoh to remind him that what he was describing was the fate that awaited Egypt (vs. 28). The prophet then resumed his catalog of nations in sheol with Edom (vs. 29). Ezekiel had already warned this nation about the approaching judgment of God (see 25:12-14).

The last two groups of people on the sheol welcome wagon were "all the princes of the north and all the Sidonians" (32:30). Both groups probably refer to the greatest seafaring nations on the eastern Mediterranean coast, the Phoenician city states (including Tyre). Those kingdoms, though mighty on the sea and world renowned for their wealth and power, went "down to

THE EDMUTES

Israel's Wayward Cousins

Edom was a mountainous kingdom east of the Arabah in what is now modern Jordan. The Edomites, descendants of Esau, were bitter enemies of Israel. The Israelites were descendants of Esau's twin brother Jacob who was later named "Israel" after his wrestling match with the angel (Gen. 32:24-28).

In their hatred of the Israelites, the Edomites perpetuated the grudge Esau held against Jacob for stealing his birthright (see Gen. 27:41). During the exodus from Egypt, they refused to allow the Israelites to pass through their land (Num. 20:14-21), and were more than willing to lend aid to any of Israel's enemies.

the pit" like all the others who had turned their backs on God.

Many of the nations Ezekiel mentioned in these verses possessed breathtaking wealth, power, and prestige. But neither money nor might could prevent their destruction. God's power is the only truly irresistible force in the universe. The divine power that absolutely ensured the judgment of these evil nations, is the same power that absolutely guarantees fulfillment of all the promises God makes to those who commit their lives to Him.

In the end, Ezekiel returned to the main subject of this section (vss. 31, 32). Pharaoh, his army, and all the "hordes" of Egypt would be joined in sheol by the nations already there. God had used Pharaoh as an instrument of judgment upon other nations. But now the personal wickedness of the Egyptian king himself and of his subjects was the reason they themselves would "go down to the pit."



7

The Watchman

Ezekiel 33—36

a Ezekiel's Call Is Renewed (33:1-11)

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

—Ezekiel 33:7

The long expected news of the fall of Jerusalem marked a turning point in Ezekiel's ministry. The focus of his prophecies prior to that event was the judgment of Israel. But with the prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction fulfilled, the heart of the prophet's message to God's people turned from imminent retribution to future restoration.

Even though Ezekiel's ministry had changed with the fall of Jerusalem, it was still necessary for the prophet to issue dire warnings and reminders of sin and responsibility both to the people and their leaders. Jerusalem's destruction had not changed the sinfulness of the people, and continued disobedience could only result in more divine judgment. Nevertheless, at this point in Ezekiel's prophecies, bright rays

of hope and healing began to break through the dark clouds of warning and woe.

Both messages in Ezekiel, that is, the certainty of punishment for sinners and the assurance of forgiveness for the repentant, must be heeded. God still issues an ominous warning to those who persist in their rebellion and sin. But at the same time, He continues to offer hope to any who turn to Him in faith with a contrite heart.

In this section, "the word of the LORD" once again came to Ezekiel as a reminder that God had chosen him as Israel's watchman on the wall (vss. 1, 2, 7; see also 3:17). But while the prophet's first appointment as a watchman was to warn the people of approaching death and destruction, the second appointment was to herald the message that God will bind up the wounds of the nation. Here too, the prophet continued to preach the message of personal responsibility for one's actions and individual accountability before God.

The Lord's command to Ezekiel to speak to his countrymen was significant. In 24:25-27, the prophet had been told not to speak to the

Israelites until Jerusalem's fall. But here, the prophet was commanded once again to sound the "trumpet" of warning for the people of Israel (33:3-6).

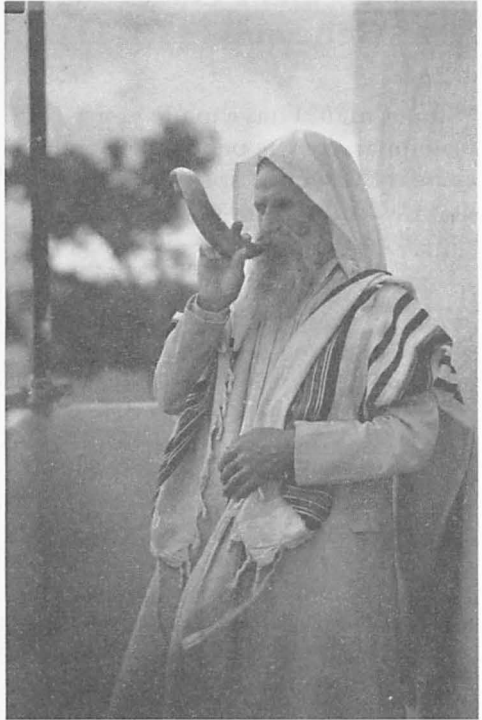
Ask Yourself . . . *In what ways do I play the role of a spiritual "watchman"?*

Once again, the prophet Ezekiel was reminded of the consequences of his actions as Israel's watchman. Israelites who heard but did not heed the warning trumpet were responsible for their own deaths at the hands of the Babylonian invaders (vss. 4-5, 9; see 3:19). God's people clearly had sufficient warning of the judgment that lay ahead. Had they heeded it, they would doubtless have escaped the destruction that fell upon the nation.

Ezekiel was also reminded that if he failed to sound the trumpet and warn the Israelites of approaching destruction, he would be held accountable for those who died (33:6, 8; see 3:18). The unwarned would indeed die because of their own sin. Yet at the same time, Ezekiel would bear a measure of guilt for their deaths because he failed to carry out his duty as God's spokesman.

It bears repeating that while all people are personally responsible for how they respond to God's gracious gift of salvation, believers have a duty to warn the perishing of the consequences of rejecting Christ. God will hold us accountable if we do not warn the lost who are within our sphere of influence.

Ezekiel's prophecies were a figurative "trumpet" of warning that danger was near (Ezek. 33:4). The "trumpet" was most likely a ram's horn, or shofar. Most shofars measured about 18 inches in length, and were made from the left horns of a fat-tailed sheep, one of the most common breeds of sheep in Israel.



In the remainder of this section and the one that follows, the marvelous truth is revealed that failure in our obedience to God does not result in a condition of hopelessness. Genuine repentance always activates God's mercy and leads to restoration of fellowship with

Him. Yet it is also true that past righteousness is not a license for disobedience, nor does it provide immunity from God's discipline and judgment.

The exiles were complaining that their past "offenses and sins" were weighing them down and causing them to waste away, literally "to rot" (33:10). The people felt doomed and saw only total destruction in their future. That admission signaled a major turning point in Ezekiel's ministry.

Previously, the Israelites had refused to acknowledge their sin or to believe Ezekiel's prophecies about God's judgment upon the nation. But with Jerusalem's fall, the exiles were left with a deep sense of despair and tremendous guilt for their many years of rebellion against God. The Lord's response was a merciful offer of forgiveness conditioned only upon the repentance of His people. When the Israelites asked how they could live under the weight of their past sin and failure, God made it clear that death was an outcome of their will, not His (vs. 11; see also 18:23, 31, 32).

Forgiveness was, and is today, available to all who repent. God fervently desires that all people turn to Him and live. His deepest concern is about what we are and can become, not what we were or have been. The Lord stands always ready to forgive the failures of the past. The cry of His heart is expressed in these words to a crushed and despondent people: "Turn! Turn from your evil

ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?"



God's Justice Is Declared (33:12-20)

"You Israelites say, 'The way of the LORD is not just.' But I will judge each of you according to your own ways."
—Ezekiel 33:20

This section of verses contains virtually the same message as Ezekiel 18:21-30. The Israelites who survived the fall of Jerusalem may have assumed that the mere fact of survival was a sign of their own personal righteousness. But the principles of chapter 18 applied as much to them as they did to the Israelites who died at the hands of the Babylonians. Those who repented and continued to walk in righteousness would live. However, Israelites who refused to repent or who turned away from righteousness, would die in their disobedience and sin.

Ezekiel again made the point that it is foolish to assume that past righteousness and good deeds furnish a kind of license to sin (33:12, 13, 18). Apparently many Israelites, like some people today, believed that former righteous deeds could be held on account and used to "pay" for deliberate sin committed in the present. But God expected complete, undiluted obedience and a continued walk in righteousness from

THE LOOK OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

In the Bible, the concept of "righteousness" is essentially the same as "holiness."

Central to the meaning of both words is the idea of acting in harmony with the character of God Himself.

When this is done, one maintains a "righteous" or "right relationship" both with God and with others.



Fundamentally, the outworking of righteousness in Scripture is presented in the language of a law court. In the Old Testament period, God sat as judge while Israel stood before Him as the accused. The laws the Israelites were accused of breaking were the terms of the covenant agreement the Lord had graciously made with His people (see Ps. 9:4; Isa. 33:15; Jer. 11:20; 1 Pet. 2:23).

every Israelite. He expects no less from His children today.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I play an internal balancing game of weighing my sins against my good deeds?*

Words of encouragement and hope were extended to the wicked who repented (vss. 14-16, 19). They would experience the gracious forgiveness of God which leads to life rather than death. The meaning of "to live" signified to some extent, gaining God's favor and the benefits which result from that divine favor. In a broader sense, as in Ezekiel 18, the references to "live" and "die" had in mind judgment on

this side of the grave (vss. 18, 19).

Ezekiel made the point once again that the repentance of the wicked should be accompanied by righteous deeds, not words alone (vs. 15). While good works cannot save us, genuine salvation should result in virtuous deeds (see Eph. 2:10; Jas. 2:14-17). Whenever possible, repentance of sin should include restitution for wrongs committed against others. In Ezekiel's example, doing what was "just and right" involved returning stolen goods or items taken as collateral for a loan (Ezek. 33:14, 15).

After the fall of Jerusalem, there were those among the Israelites

who blamed God for their plight and maintained that His ways were unjust (vss. 17, 20; compare 18:25, 29, 30). Often today many can be heard charging such things as natural disasters and human deformities to God's account. Anything praiseworthy, however, they credit to themselves or to human effort in general.

As always, when God's justice was called into question by Ezekiel's fellow Israelites, the prophet quickly pointed out that they were being judged for their own sin. The problem was not with God, but with His disobedient, rebellious people. In complete fairness and justice, God told the Israelites, "I will judge each of you according to your own ways" (33:20b).



Jerusalem's Fall Is Announced (33:21-29)

In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has fallen!"

—Ezekiel 33:21

Ezekiel was prepared for the new ministry that would begin with word of Jerusalem's fall. That news arrived on January 9, 585 B.C. The awful truth was delivered by an

Israelite survivor of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. By the time he completed the long journey to Babylon to tell Ezekiel of Jerusalem's fate, the city had already been in ruins for six months (vs. 21). But at the arrival of the news, and after seven years of divinely controlled speech (see 3:26, 27), the prophet was once more allowed to speak freely to God's people (33:22).

In the remainder of chapter 33, Ezekiel directed his message to two groups of people. The first were those living among the ruins of Israel after the Babylonian devastation (vss. 23-29). The second group consisted of the prophet's fellow exiles living in Babylon (vss. 30-33). Ezekiel had words of condemnation for both groups.

Those still living in Israel apparently expected Babylonian domination of the land to be short-lived. Furthermore, they either missed the point that their plight was the result of divine judgment, or else they believed their survival of the Babylonian siege was a divine sign that they were the legitimate inheritors of the promised land. To validate their supposition, they set forth a feeble argument. They maintained that if God had given Abraham, only "one man," possession of the land, then it was logical to assume that He had now given it as a possession to the "many" who had remained there (vs. 24).

God instructed Ezekiel to point out a fatal flaw in this argument. Nothing had changed. The Israelite

survivors were a sinful and rebellious people (vss. 25, 26). In defiance of God's law they ate "meat with the blood still in it," worshiped idols, committed murder and adultery, and did a variety of other "detestable things." Yet remarkably, they still expected to possess the land. The truth, however, was that the people's sins nullified their right to possess the land promised to Abraham.

As incredible as the attitude of those Israelites seems to us, many of God's people today are no different. Several live in willful disobedience to the principles set forth in Scripture, yet they still expect only "showers of blessing" from heaven that ignores their sin. But like the remnant in Israel, disobedient Christians have no justification for expecting anything except divine discipline.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I clinging to any pet sins?*

God's message to the remnant in Israel was to expect dire judgment, not a deed to the promised land. Ezekiel told the people that city-dwellers would die by the sword, country-dwellers would be eaten by wild animals, and cave-dwellers would die of the plague (vs. 27; compare 5:17; 14:21). Furthermore, "because of all the detestable things they [had] done," God would make the land of Judah a "desolate waste." Perhaps finally, the people would get the message that the Lord had brought this judgment upon the land because of Israel's sin (33:28, 29).



The People's Lives Remain Unchanged (33:30-33)

"My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain."
—Ezekiel 33:31

The Babylonian exiles, whom Ezekiel addressed next, had apparently learned no more from recent events than the remnant living in Israel. Before the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel had warned the Israelites about coming judgment upon themselves and their land. But the prophet's message was met with indifference and disbelief.

Yet even as Israel lay in ruins, the attitude among the exiles was little changed. They were still unresponsive and unmoved. They listened to the prophet's words and observed his strange actions with curiosity, but continued to live unchanged lives.

Much like the Israelites, so many people today view Christians and their message of forgiveness and renewal with a measure of curiosity. But then they turn away unaffected and unchanged. We should never give up, however. We do not witness to unbelievers only because of the benefit they will gain from receiving salvation (see Rom. 1:16;

6:23), but out of faithfulness to God's command to share the Good News with the lost (see Matt. 28:19, 20).

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I emotionally prepared for the rejection that often accompanies sharing the gospel?*

Apparently, Ezekiel provided a source of entertainment for the exiles. The people assembled regularly at the prophet's house to hear his latest prophecies. But they had little intention of obeying the divine commands contained in them (Ezek. 33:30, 31a; compare Jas. 1:22-25).

God described His people as giving an outward appearance of loving Him while their hearts hungered

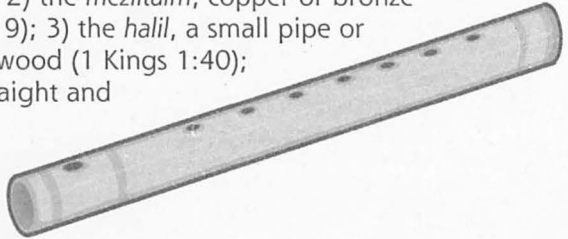
more for money than for doing His will. Ezekiel's words, as far as the exiles were concerned, were merely a pleasing distraction. They were like beautifully sung love songs accompanied by well-played instruments. In other words, what the prophet said penetrated the exiles' ears, but not their hearts.

In every congregation there are some who only play at being devoted to God. They see the church, with its music and many opportunities for socializing, as a good source of inexpensive entertainment. Such people have little interest in obedience and service to the Lord. God calls us not only to listen attentively

Music without Meaning

Ezekiel's words were described as entertainment for the Israelites like that provided by one who sings and plays an instrument well (Ezek. 33:32).

Throughout Israel's history, music played an important part in both the secular and religious life of the nation. Some of the instruments known from Bible times are: 1) the *nebel*, a stringed instrument (Ps. 71:22); 2) the *mezitaim*, copper or bronze cymbals (1 Chron. 15:19); 3) the *halil*, a small pipe or flute made of bone or wood (1 Kings 1:40); and 4) the *hazora*, a straight and simple cone-shaped trumpet made of silver (Num. 10:5).



to His Word, but to make it the guiding principle of action in every area of our lives.

The exiles may have had little more regard for Ezekiel and his prophecies than for a singer of love songs. But when all of his prophecies came true, the people's attitude would change. Then they would know for a fact that Ezekiel was indeed a true prophet who spoke the word of the living God (Ezek. 33:32, 33).

Ezekiel 34—36 in Brief

In Ezekiel 34, God denounced both the leaders and the people of Israel. The leaders had exploited and misled the people placed under their care by the Lord. But God Himself will one day gather His people and return them to their homeland. There, the Messiah will provide them with care and security in the land.

With the people of Israel and Judah held in captivity, Edom had planned to take over their land. But

God's judgment upon Edom would nullify that nation's expansionistic plans. The purpose of Ezekiel 35 was to provide background information for chapters 36 and 37, which dealt with the restoration of the Israelites to their land.

Ezekiel was commanded to "prophesy to the mountains of Israel" (36:1) and tell them that the defeat of the nation had caused neighboring peoples to ridicule and scorn the God of Israel. But that scorn would be turned upon those who mocked God's power when He judged Israel's enemies. For the glory of His own name, God would cause a desolate Israel to flower and prosper as never before when His truly repentant people returned to their land.

After their return from exile, the people of Israel finally rejected their practice of idolatry. It was never again to be the problem it had been from the nation's beginning. But a greater transformation was yet to come. God would permanently replace His people's hearts of stone with new hearts of flesh.

8

Israel's Restoration Prophesied

Ezekiel 37—39

a **The Dry Bones Vision Presented (37:1-10)**

He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."
—Ezekiel 37:2, 3

In a startling and memorable image, the prophet Ezekiel portrayed God's chosen people as a

vast army of slain soldiers whose bleached bones lay strewn about a valley floor. What possible hope could there be for Israel? The nation was in ruins. The people were scattered, held captive by pagan rulers in far-off lands.

The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria in 722 B.C., and Judah's fate was sealed when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586. With the land desolate and the people enslaved, the "people of Israel" (Ezek. 37:11) were as politically and spiritually dead as the last remains of a great host of dead soldiers.

OF BONES AND BURIALS

In Bible times, much as today, human remains were customarily treated with respect and dignity, and given a proper burial whenever possible. On a number of occasions, however, a conquering army showed its utter contempt for those conquered by abusing the bodies of the vanquished. When the Philistines found the bodies of Saul and his three sons, for example, they cut off the king's head and hung his body and those of his sons on a wall at Beth Shan (1 Sam. 31:9, 10). When word of this terrible indignity reached the people of Jabesh Gilead, at great personal risk to themselves, their most valiant warriors traveled by night to Beth Shan and retrieved the four bodies. "Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh" (1 Sam. 31:11-13).

However, that was not the point of Ezekiel's prophecies to a lifeless, vanquished nation. His purpose in these chapters was to vividly show that God intended to restore His people to their land. When that happened, the Lord would bring both political and spiritual revival to a unified nation. Ezekiel 37, with its visions of revived bones, and united sticks, presented wonderful pictures of the new land and new life God had promised Israel.

Perhaps Ezekiel often felt as if he were preaching to the dead when he prophesied to the exiles. Although they heard his words, they resolutely refused to act upon them. Now, even those who wanted to believe the prophecies concerning a restored nation probably doubted that it could ever happen. But in a vision, God demonstrated to Ezekiel that even lifeless, fleshless, sun-parched bones could be brought to life by divine power. With God, nothing is impossible.

The message to people of all ages is clear. If God can breathe life into skeletons, He can breathe life into anyone. No one is too bad, too far gone, too dead in their trespasses and sins to receive a new life at the hands of the sovereign Lord of the universe.

The vision opened with "the Spirit of the LORD" transporting Ezekiel to a valley littered everywhere with human bones. The prophet's observation that the bones were "very dry" suggests that these were individuals who had been dead for a considerable length of time. There

could not possibly have been even a spark or flicker of life remaining in those bones (vss. 1, 2).

Remarkably, God asked the prophet if he thought those bones could come back to life. Ezekiel's response was indirect and measured. Humanly speaking, the prophet may have thought, "Not a chance." But since he knew in his heart that God could do anything, he replied, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know" (vs. 3).

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I faced an impossible challenge that only God could resolve?*

God instructed Ezekiel to deliver a message to the dry bones. He was going to breathe new life into them. Seven times the Hebrew word *ruach*, meaning "breath," "wind," or "spirit," was used to signify the one essential component that was absent from Israel's dry bones but necessary for the nation's restoration to life (vss. 5, 6, 8-10, see vs. 14).

Whether the meaning of *ruach* in Ezekiel 37 is physical breath, wind, the animating life principle, or the Holy Spirit, is not clear. The result, however, was unambiguous. As breath came "from the four winds" and entered refurbished corpses, "they came to life and stood up on their feet." In spite of seemingly insurmountable odds, Israel would live again (vss. 9, 10).

Many individuals may feel as if their own lives are like a pile of dried out bones with no breath in them. Or perhaps you are a Christian who attends a church

that fits Ezekiel's description of lifeless corpses. On the outside, the bodies appeared normal, with tendons, flesh, and a skin covering. But inside, there was no spirit or life (vss. 7, 8). God, however, can breathe new spiritual life into individuals or bodies of believers, just as He breathed His life-giving Spirit into the corpse of Israel.



The Dry Bones Vision Explained (37:11-14)

"Prophesy and say to [Israel]: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.' "

—Ezekiel 37:12

What was the meaning of the vision? God explained it in such a way that there could be no misunderstanding. He told Ezekiel that the bones represented "the people of Israel." That included both the northern kingdom of Ephraim (or Israel) and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Exiled from a homeland that lay in ruins, the people of Israel were like dried-up, unburied bones. Here Ezekiel changed the figure from bones scattered on a valley floor to bones buried in graves. But in either case, as far as God's people

were concerned the outcome was the same. They saw themselves as utterly without hope, cut off from any path to national restoration or redemption (vs. 11).

From where the exiles stood, God's judgment upon their nation looked thorough and final. When the Babylonian army invaded Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and enslaved the people, what remained of the Israelite nation had gone down into the grave and could not possibly rise again. Clearly the people had forgotten with Whom they were dealing.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever prematurely conceded defeat?*

God's response to the hopeless, helpless state of His people was to promise them nothing less than a miracle. He even repeated the promise twice to make sure the Israelites got the point (vss. 12, 13). Politically and spiritually, Israel may have been as good as dead and buried. But outward circumstances are irrelevant to God. He would simply open the graves of His people, bring them out, and restore them to their homeland. By this great and mighty act, God's covenant people would come to know that He is indeed Lord.

The restoration of Israel involved not only the land, but the spiritual life of the people as well. The very Spirit of God Himself gives life (vs. 14). God asked Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" For the Israelites, or for any people in any time or place, the regenerating Spirit of God replies with an emphatic, yes!

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I know anyone who seems to be spiritually unreachable?*



Judah and Israel Reunited (37:15-22)

I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.

—Ezekiel 37:21b, 22

This section reveals, through the symbolism of two sticks, the reunification of the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Like the vision of the dry bones, this sign was a visual representation of Israel's future restoration. First, the sign of reunification was presented and explained (vss. 15-22). Then the blessings the reunified nation would experience were revealed (see vss. 23-28).

Ezekiel was told to take two wooden sticks and write an inscription on each one of them (vss. 15, 16). The inscription on the first stick indicated that it belonged to Judah and his Israelite associates. The southern kingdom was known as Judah because that was its principal

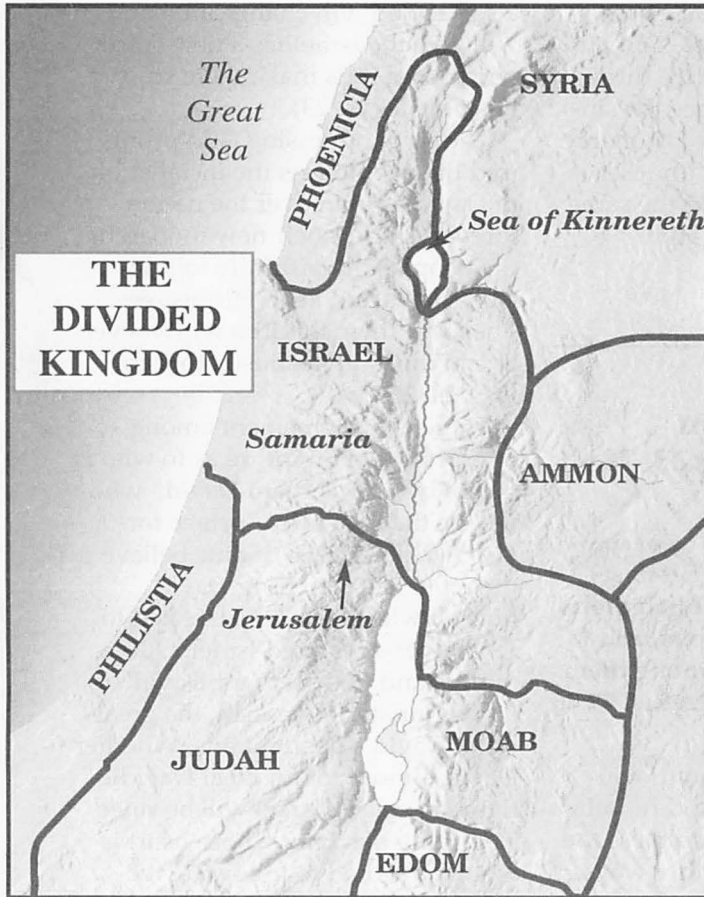
Divided They Fell

When Solomon died in 931 B.C., the harsh policies of his son Rehoboam resulted in the division of Israel into two separate kingdoms. Ten northern tribes broke away and formed the new kingdom of Israel. The tribe of Judah, and most of the tribes of Benjamin and Simeon, formed the southern kingdom of Judah. While a number of factors led to the division of the nation, the fracture was clearly by God's design (1 Kings 11:31; 12:15, 24). It was His judgment upon Solomon for rejecting Him and turning to pagan gods.

The division of the kingdom brought steady decline to the once powerful and prosperous nation ruled by David and Solomon. In 722 B.C., the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria. Judah, a more stable and spiritually minded kingdom, managed to hold out until 586 B.C. when Jerusalem, as prophesied by Ezekiel, finally fell to Babylon.

tribe. In addition to this, its king was from the tribe of Judah (see 1 Kings 12:22-24).

The other stick was inscribed to show that it belonged to Ephraim and Joseph and all the Israelites associated with them. While the



exiles. The purpose of the action sign was to prompt those who witnessed it to ask what it meant (Ezek. 37:17-18). The Lord is eager for all to understand His message through any means necessary.

Ask Yourself

... How could I help people who claim the Bible is too difficult to understand?

By joining the two sticks in his hand, Ezekiel was portraying the restoration and reunification of all of God's people in the land. The Lord declared that He would gather the Israelites, who were scattered and held captive throughout other nations, and

bring them back to their land. Israel would once again be a single nation under one king, never to be divided again (vss. 19-22; see Hos. 1:11).

In spite of Israel's long history of rebellion against Him and rejection of His laws, God refused to wash His hands of His obstinate people. There are always some who feel that the Lord has given up on them. Others are sure He has simply overlooked or forgotten them. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The same God who takes no pleasure

northern kingdom was most often called "Israel," it was sometimes called "Ephraim" as well (see Hos. 5:3, 5, 11-14). The house of Joseph was made up of the two powerful tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh which comprised the main body of the northern kingdom. Ephraim was the more powerful of the two tribes.

After he had inscribed both sticks, Ezekiel was commanded to hold them together in one hand to form a single stick. All of this was supposed to be done in the sight of the

in the death of anyone, and who desires that all should live, sent His Son to die that all might live through Him. If God could embrace the sinful Israelites, and shower His mercy and blessings upon such undeserving people, will He not do the same for anyone who turns to Him?



Blessings of Reunification Assured (37:23-28)

"I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever."
—Ezekiel 37:26

In addition to the foundational blessings of restoration and reunification, God said He would bless the people of Israel in four other ways. First, He will purify the nation of its idolatry. Second, He will install David as king over Israel. Third, He will establish a permanent covenant of peace with the people. And finally, He will dwell in the midst of Israel forever.

Once the people were returned to the land, God promised to cleanse the nation of its sin. Particular reference was made to the vile practice of idolatry and to Israel's tendency to backslide. God's people were ever prone to desert Him in preference for pagan idols and religious ritu-

als. But God will change all that. He will give the Israelites a new spirit within and thus make them truly His people (vs. 23).

The second blessing God promised the people was the installation of David as king over the nation forever. Under their new monarch, the people will faithfully follow God's laws and keep His decrees. They and their children will forever live in the land promised to Jacob (vss. 24, 25).

There is disagreement among interpreters of Scripture as to who is meant by "my servant David" who will be the Israelites' "prince forever" (vss. 24a, 25b). Some believe the reference is to King David himself who will be resurrected to reign over a restored Israel. Others understand this "servant David" to mean Christ the Messiah, the greatest of David's descendants. Whether David himself, or an ideal Davidic figure is meant, Israel will be ruled by a righteous king whose heart is wholly devoted to following the laws and decrees of God. No sin of any kind will have a part in the spiritual life of Israel ever again.

The third blessing promised to Israel is an everlasting covenant of peace between God and His people (vs. 26a). This is the "new covenant" mentioned by Jeremiah (see Jer. 31:31-34). The covenant will last forever because its foundation will be the grace of God bestowed upon a spiritually regenerated people.

Finally, God promised the people of Israel that He would come to dwell among them in a permanent

Binding Covenants

A biblical covenant was a binding contract, usually between two parties who agreed to keep stated promises and fulfill specified

obligations. The two parties in Scripture were most often God and the nation of Israel. However, it was common practice in the Middle East for a covenant, or treaty, to be established between two nations.

Among the best known of the covenants in Scripture are those made with Abraham, Moses, and David (Gen. 17; Exod. 20—24; 2 Sam. 7). All three followed the typical covenant pattern: certain promises would be fulfilled if specified obligations were met.

state of unbroken fellowship (Ezek. 37:26b-28). In the history of their nation, the Israelites had witnessed the rise and demise of three important dwelling places of God's Spirit among them. These included the tabernacle and two temples.

The tabernacle, a portable place of worship made of animal skins, was God's first dwelling place in Israel. It was eventually replaced by a more permanent place of worship, Solomon's temple. Yet in time, just as Ezekiel prophesied, Nebuchadnezzar's army destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple along with it.

The second temple, built by Zerubbabel, was later enlarged and beautified by King Herod the Great. That temple, the center of Jewish worship in New Testament times, was destroyed by the Roman general Titus in A.D. 70. While all three of these places where God met Israel were temporary, the Lord promised His people a future dwelling place that would last forever.

Ask Yourself . . . *When am I most aware of God's presence?*

Ezekiel 38—39 in Brief

Ezekiel interrupted his picture of Israel's future restoration and blessing with prophecies concerning the defeat of the nation's last great enemies. Magog, Meshech, Tubal, and Gomer were all born to Japheth, one of Noah's sons. They were each the founder of a nation in the north, in the Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian seas. That was

the northern outpost of the known world in Ezekiel's day.

According to Ezekiel, these nations will be the source of an invasion of barbarians from the north led by "Gog," ruler of the people of Magog. With allies from Persia (modern Iran), Cush (northern Sudan?), Put (Libya?), and Beth Togarmah (Armenia?), Gog will wage war with the people of God. But with mighty power witnessed by all, God will utterly destroy the forces of Gog and his allied armies.

Ezekiel 39 amplifies the events of chapter 38, giving fantastic examples

of the extent of God's mighty victory over Israel's enemies. Ezekiel revealed that Gog's army will be so large that the weapons left by the vanquished forces will provide Israel with a seven-year fuel supply. So many invading soldiers will be slain that the people of Israel will need seven months to bury the dead. The total defeat of Gog, as indicated by the massive burial of his army, will magnify the glory and power of God among the nations. This great victory will pave the way for the return and restoration of God's people to the land of Israel.

2

Temple Worship Is Restored

Ezekiel 40—43

Ezekiel 40—42 in Brief

Sometime in 573 B.C., on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his exile to Babylon, Ezekiel was supernaturally transported to Jerusalem. There the prophet received a remarkable and detailed vision of a future temple to be built in Israel's restored land.

The vision has been interpreted in four main ways: (1) This was supposed to be the temple built by Zerubbabel in 520-515 B.C., after the return from the Babylonian exile, but it fell short of Ezekiel's blueprint; (2) The temple is symbolic of the Christian church's earthly glory, blessing, and true worship of God in the present age; (3) The temple is a symbolic description of the final form of God's kingdom when His presence and blessing fill the whole earth; (4) Ezekiel's temple is a literal, future temple which will be built in Israel during the 1,000-year millennial reign of Christ on earth.

Ezekiel saw the future temple measured with a reed which was ten feet, four inches long. He was guided through the temple either by an angel or Christ Himself. During

the tour, Ezekiel was given detailed measurements and descriptions of the entire temple complex, including the temple proper, and the chambers in the inner court.

a

Glory Returns to the Temple (43:1-12)

The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.
—Ezekiel 43:4, 5

The nation of Israel was as dead as bleached bones strewn about a sun-parched valley floor. It was the consummate picture of a destruction so thorough that no rational person could possibly envision this nation ever coming to life again. There was no precedent. No nation in history had ever risen from the ashes after having come to such a devastating end. But other nations worshiped gods made of wood and stone. Israel served the Lord of the universe.

What great hope Ezekiel's words must have brought to the people of Israel. He had already prophesied about restored land, a reunified nation, and renewed fellowship with the Lord. But there was even more to come.

Ezekiel 33—39 painted a picture of the new life the Israelites could expect when they were returned from exile, restored to their land, and reunited in fellowship with God. Ezekiel 40—48 explained the form this new life would take. A newly constructed temple was described to the exiles and presented as an important sign that God would indeed dwell among His people once again, just as He promised He would. Ezekiel explained how a newly established service of worship would provide the means of access to God. Finally, the prophet unveiled the grand divisions and blessings of the new land awaiting the people of Israel.

What a marvelous picture the prophet painted of God's power to redeem the crushed, the defeated, or the dispossessed. The Lord alone can bring hope to the hopeless, restoration and healing to the wounded of body and soul. There is no devastation or defeat His infinite grace and mercy cannot turn into victory.

About 18 and a half years earlier, Ezekiel had witnessed in a vision the departure of God's glory through the eastern gate of the temple built by Solomon (see 10:18, 19; 11:22, 23). Led by the same man who had taken him through the temple, the prophet

saw the return and reentry of the Lord into the new temple "through the gate facing east" (43:1, 4, 5). What joy Ezekiel must have felt to see God's presence in the midst of His people once again. The prophet surely longed, as most believers do, for the time when the glorified Lord will return to live among His people forever.

In His vision of the return of God's glory, Ezekiel said the Lord's "voice was like the roar of rushing waters" (vs. 2). This apparently signified God's power and majesty. The prophet mentioned also that this vision was like others he had seen previously (vs. 3). The vision regarding the destruction of the city is recorded in chapters 8—11, while those by the Kebar River may be found in chapters 1 and 10.

As the Lord returned to the temple, He delivered a message to Israel through the prophet Ezekiel. First, He indicated that He was accepting the new temple as His dwelling place among the Israelites. Second, He made it clear that since this was to be His place of residence among His people, no defilement of any kind would be allowed there (43:6, 7a).

The meaning of the term "their prostitution" is not clear (vss. 7b, 9a). Certain forms of pagan idol worship involved temple prostitutes. Some have suggested that is the meaning here. Others, however, understand the term in a figurative sense as signifying the "spiritual adultery" of God's people. Israel is often portrayed in Scripture as an

unfaithful spouse enticed away from the Lord by pagan gods.

In earlier times, the tombs of the Israelite kings were placed on the same hill as the temple. The king's palace and the temple were connected, but separated by a wall (vs. 8). Thus Ezekiel was told that the shameful practice of placing the kings' graves near the temple, as well as their living quarters where "detestable practices" often occurred, would no longer be tolerated. God emphasized that according to the law of the future temple "all the surrounding area" on the temple mount "will be most holy" (vs. 12).

The reason for revealing the design of the new temple and the nature of the religious observances to be practiced there, was explained to Ezekiel. A clear picture of God's ideal plan for the people would remind them of the sin that brought judgment upon them. It would also motivate them to return to God in obedience with a desire to follow all of the laws and regulations instituted in the new temple (vss. 10, 11).

Holiness was the basic law of God's new temple (vs. 12), because God is holy. Even His name is holy. Just as God is holy, He expects those who follow Him to live holy lives (see Lev. 19:1, 2; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16). Holiness requires complete devotion to God, and constant rejection of sin. Growth toward Christian maturity is vitally linked to the practice of holy living.

Ask Yourself . . . *Would I describe myself as holy?*

Ezekiel described the temple, God's future dwelling place, in terms and images the people could easily understand. God wanted His people to see what was in store for those who lived in faithful obedience to Him. The hard road of sin ultimately leads to judgment, as Israel learned all too well. But the pathway of obedience to the Lord leads to blessing, joy, and a peace that only God can give.



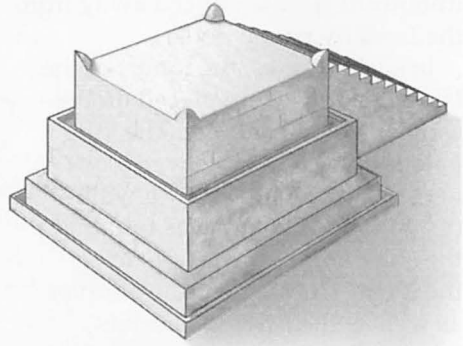
Dimensions of a New Altar Are Given (43:13-17)

"These are the measurements of the altar in long cubits, that cubit being a cubit and a handbreadth."

—Ezekiel 43:13a

After the new temple is built and God's glory fills it, worship services will begin. To set the stage for this, Ezekiel described the future altar. Next, he presented the regulations for consecrating the altar (see vss. 18-27).

The measurements for the altar, like those for the temple itself, were given to Ezekiel in great detail. To avoid any confusion, the prophet was even informed that the dimensions were in "long cubits" (vs. 13a). A "long cubit" was approximately 21 inches in length, while



The photo to the left is a reconstructed "horned altar" found at Beersheba. It was probably used for burnt offerings. The altar may date to 701 B.C. and the Assyrian king Sennacherib's first attack on the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Hezekiah. The artist's drawing to the right is a model of the four-horned altar envisioned by Ezekiel. It is clearly more elaborate than its Old Testament counterpart.

a short cubit measured about 18 inches. A "handbreadth" was about three inches long and a "span" was approximately nine inches in length.

The altar consisted of four stages or platforms, including the "gutter" or base section on the very bottom. This lowest base level was 21 inches high and extended 21 inches out from the next higher platform on all sides. It had a nine-inch rim or molding all around it (vs. 13b).

The next level up from the base was a stone platform three and a half feet high. It also extended 21 inches out from the next higher platform on all sides. The third level, just beneath the horned altar itself, was seven feet high with a surrounding ledge, in a "gutter" design like the base, 21 inches wide (vs. 14). This third level was 24 and a half feet long on each side with a "rim" 10 and a half inches high (vs. 17a).

The topmost level of the altar complex, the "altar hearth" or altar proper, was also seven feet high like the platform below. But it was distinguished by a 21-inch horn at each of its four corners. The top level measured 21 feet on each side (vss. 15-16). The whole altar complex had steps on the east side that led up to the top of the altar (vs. 17b). This was actually forbidden by the law of Moses (see Exod. 20:26). But at a height of 19 feet—nearly two stories—the altar would be impossible to reach without them.

In the Old Testament, sacrificial animals were laid out on the altar hearth. The blood of the animal was smeared on the altar horns (see Exod. 29:12; Lev. 4:7, 18). The horns of the altar were also regarded as places of refuge (see 1 Kings 1:49-53). If an individual were in mortal

danger because of some wrong done to another, grasping the horns of the altar was supposed to prompt mercy from the person seeking revenge. This act was presumably symbolic of God's gracious acceptance of Israelite sacrifices offered in atonement for the people's sins.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I been shown mercy recently?*



Regulations for Consecrating the Altar Are Given (43:18-21)

"Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: These will be the regulations for sacrificing burnt offerings and splashing blood against the altar when it is built."
—Ezekiel 43:18

In a sense, Ezekiel's vision here was looking backward and forward at the same time. It looked backward to the time of Moses when the imperfect sacrificial system was first instituted. It looked forward to the perfect sacrifice of Christ which fulfilled the potential and promise of the imperfect animal sacrifices. The Israelites could approach God and receive forgiveness for their sins only because of Calvary. Today, it is still the only means by which we can gain acceptance by God and experience complete pardon from sin.

It was revealed to Ezekiel that a seven-day ritual administered by the priests, from the "family of Zadok" who were members of the tribe of Levi, would be required to consecrate the altar to God (vss. 18, 19; see vs. 26). The Zadokite priesthood originated when Solomon set aside the priestly line of Eli by deposing Abiathar and putting Zadok in his place (see 1 Kings 2:26, 27). The priesthood of the house of Eli had already been condemned by God because of Eli's two worthless sons, Hophni and Phinehas (see 1 Sam. 2:30-36).

The Lord indicated that the altar would be truly purified after blood from the sin offering was applied to "the four horns of the altar," the four corners of the platform below the altar hearth, and on the rim of the base. After the blood of the sacrificial bull was used for this purpose, the carcass of the animal was supposed to be burned in a specific place outside the sanctuary (Ezek. 43:20, 21). Everything in temple worship had a precise purpose, place, and order. God required that it all be done exactly as He instructed.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I take some of God's commands less seriously than others?*

Many interpreters of Scripture object to the idea of the reinstatement of sacrifices in the new temple and thus view Ezekiel's description of future sacrifices as symbolic rather than literal. They argue that to reinstate animal sacrifices in the last days implies that Christ's death was

Once for All

One of the most important words in all of Scripture is the word "atonement." Ezekiel twice refers to making atonement for the altar (Ezek. 43:20, 26). The root meaning of the Hebrew word for atonement, *kaphar*, is "to cover over." Atonement in Scripture is closely related to the concept of "reconciliation," bringing together those who were estranged, or enemies.

In the Old Testament, the blood of rams and goats "covered over" the sins of Israel. But the purpose of blood atonement was not merely to conceal sins from sight. It was meant to pay the ransom price required for canceling out the debt and penalty owed by sin. But the blood of rams and goats was only a symbol of the sacrificial death of Christ, the perfect Lamb of God. His sacrifice alone was sufficient to stamp the debt owed by sin, "Paid in full."

somehow deficient. They point out that according to Scripture, Christ's sacrifice was the permanent remedy for sin, making all further sacrifices unnecessary (see Rom. 6:10; Heb. 9:12; 10:10, 18).

Other Bible scholars believe that the problem is solved if the function of Ezekiel's sacrifices are properly understood. First of all, they explain, animal sacrifices could not take away sin. They assert that the only way to be saved in any age is by grace through faith in the shed blood of Christ (see Heb. 10:1-4, 10). Proponents of this view point out that even after the church began at Pentecost, Jewish Christians still

offered sacrifices in the temple, perhaps as memorials to Christ's death (see Acts 2:46; 21:26). In the new temple, say these interpreters, animal sacrifices will also serve as memorials honoring the ultimate, efficacious sacrifice of Christ.

The conclusion of the matter is essentially the same as the controversy surrounding the building of the future temple. Whether taken symbolically or literally, the Israelites no doubt simply took Ezekiel's message at face value. The message was clear. The worship and fellowship with God that Israel had lost because of divine judgment for sin, would one day be restored.

d Regulations for Consecrating the Altar Continue (43:22-27)

"On the second day you are to offer a male goat without defect for a sin offering, and the altar is to be purified as it was purified with the bull."

—Ezekiel 43:22

The sacrificial animals specified for the consecration ceremony, all without defect as required by the Mosaic law, are bulls, goats, and

rams (vss. 22, 23, 25; see vs. 21). These are to be used in three types of required offerings: burnt offerings, sin offerings, and fellowship offerings (vss. 22, 24, 25, 27; see vss. 18, 19, 21). It is evident that in order for the altar to be consecrated and properly cleansed, the shedding of blood is essential.

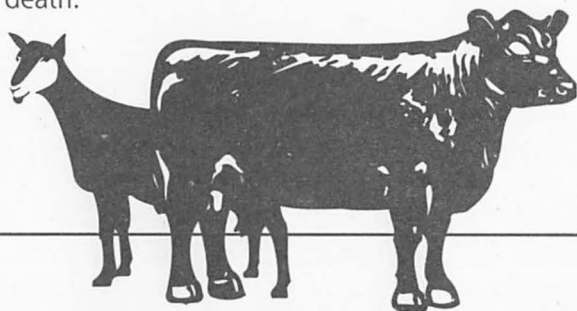
The meaning of sprinkling salt on the sacrificial animals may be found in Leviticus 2:13. Salt was a symbol of Israel's relationship with God. Today, every Orthodox Jewish meal includes eating bread with salt.

With the consecration offerings completed, from the eighth day onward the priests are to begin

Expressions of Sacrifice

The Book of Leviticus reveals these basic facts about Jewish sacrifices: (1) They were made to God alone and thus required the choicest animals and produce; (2) They were God's provision for humankind's approach to Him; (3) Unlike most pagan religions, they were usually performed by the worshiper and the priest together; (4) They were limited in their effectiveness; pardon was effected by God, not the blood of bulls and goats; (5) They represented a substitution.

Often the death of an animal was regarded as taking the place of the one who brought the sacrifice. But Christ alone, the only perfect sacrifice, was qualified to serve as the substitute for sin that deserved death.



regular offerings on behalf of the people. Specifically mentioned are "burnt offerings and fellowship offerings." When these offerings begin, God will accept His people. This will signify full reinstatement of Israel's fellowship and communion with God (Ezek. 43:27).

This section of verses closed with a wonderful promise from God. The people themselves will be accepted by the Lord on the basis of their

sacrifices. The promise was possible only because all of the sacrifices pointed to Christ. Without His death on the cross, they would signify nothing. What a bright hope was given to the people of Israel, and to us today.

Ask Yourself . . . *How would my life be different if Christ had not died on the cross?*

10

Service in the New Temple

Ezekiel 44—48

a The Prince and the Sanctuary (44:1-9)

"The prince himself is the only one who may sit inside the gateway to eat in the presence of the LORD. He is to enter by way of the portico of the gateway and go out the same way."

—Ezekiel 44:3

God had already given Ezekiel a thorough description of the future temple (Ezek. 40—43). Next, He explained the new service of worship in the temple (44—46). This was

followed by a picture of the new land of Israel, with its life-giving river, its boundaries and divisions (47—48). Taken all together, it was a dazzling portrait of a bright future ahead for God's people.

In this chapter, God revealed to Ezekiel the routine operation of the future temple. He discussed the duties of its appointed ministers, the priests and Levites, and the means of their support. But even as the Lord described the holy practices that would be followed in the future kingdom, He found it necessary to call the people to account for their unholy practices in the present. In

Ezekiel was led by a heavenly being to the "outer gate" of Jerusalem (Ezek. 44:1). The walled city of Jerusalem in Christ's day was accessible only by means of one of its many gates. The city's main entrance from the east was the "Golden Gate," which led into the outer court of Herod's temple. This



gate, which opened into the Kidron Valley and faced the Mount of Olives, may be the one through which Jesus entered the city in His "triumphal entry" (Mark 11:7-11). Just a week later, He was crucified.

every age, while our Lord willingly extends grace and forgiveness in one hand, the actions of His children force Him to deliver words of rebuke and the rod of discipline in the other.

Ezekiel had received instructions about the altar while standing in the temple's inner court (see 43:5). Next, he was taken by his angelic guide back to the outer eastern gate of the sanctuary. Ezekiel saw that the gate was shut, and was told that it would remain closed because the glory of the Lord had entered the temple through it (44:1, 2).

The prophet was also informed that "the prince himself" will be the only one authorized to enter and depart "by way of the portico of the gateway." The "portico," or vestibule, will face the outer court. In this gateway vestibule, the prince will eat in the Lord's presence. Perhaps he will eat the fellowship offering associated with temple worship (vs. 3; see 43:4; 46:2; Lev. 7:15-21).

The identity of the prince is impossible to determine with certainty. Some believe He is the Messiah, but this cannot be because this prince needs a sin offering (see 45:22) and he has sons (see 46:16). Others believe the prince is King David, or some other human representative of the Messiah in the government of the kingdom age to come (see Ezek. 34:23-24; 37:24).

The angel next led Ezekiel back into the inner court through the north gate. There the prophet saw "the glory of the LORD" fill the tem-

ple. In awe and reverence, he fell on his face (44:4). Many believers today have lost their sense of awe and reverence for the Lord. Familiarity has perhaps obscured the majesty of the One we worship. While He has indeed invited His children to address Him as "Father," He nevertheless remains the glorious Lord of the universe.

Ask Yourself . . . *How much do I respect God?*

In the wake of God's glory and holiness and in accordance with the regulations of the new temple, Ezekiel was clearly instructed to tell "rebellious Israel" that the Lord had had enough of their "detestable practices." A holy God demanded holiness from His people. Nothing less would be tolerated by Him (vss. 5, 6; see Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16).

Special reference was made to the Israelites' former practice of allowing "foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh" into the old temple, thereby desecrating it (vs. 7). Provision was made in the law of Moses for God-fearing foreigners to present offerings to the Lord (see Lev. 17:10, 12; Num. 15:14). God wanted Israel to be a light to the nations so all peoples would look to Him for salvation. But what Ezekiel condemned here was allowing non-Israelites to serve in the sanctuary (Ezek. 44:7-9).

Before the Jerusalem temple's destruction, the Levites had allowed foreigners to perform some of the mundane work of the sanctuary. These were duties the Levites were

supposed to do themselves. But God indicated that only those properly prepared spiritually and physically will be allowed to participate in the worship at the new temple. The ceremonial cleanliness of the Levites was a means of acknowledging God's holiness.

God declared that even while the Israelites were making sacrifices to Him, because of their detestable practices, they desecrated His temple and broke their covenant with Him. The Lord is not honored by mere rituals and ceremonies. Obedience is what He desires most.



The Levites and Their Service (44:10-16)

[The Levites] may serve in my sanctuary, having charge of the gates of the temple and serving in it; they may slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people and stand before the people and serve them.
—Ezekiel 44:11

God explained to Ezekiel what the duties of the Levites would be in the new temple. As a consequence of their disobedience and idolatry prior to the Babylonian captivity, the Levites will essentially be servants rather than ministers. They will be limited to gatekeeping, slaughtering sacrificial animals, and assisting the people in their worship (vss. 10, 11).

The Beginnings of Jewish Clergy

Levi was one of the 12 sons of Jacob from whom the 12 tribes of Israel were descended. In the beginning, the Levites were no different from the other 11 tribes. But later, they were assigned a special place among God's people because they showed their devotion to the Lord when the rest of Israel worshiped the golden calf at Mount Sinai (see Exod. 32:25-29).

The Levites were set apart for special religious duties. Those duties were divided among Levi's three sons, Kohath, Gershon, and Merari, whose descendants comprised the three clans of Levi. The family of Aaron, the brother of Moses, was set apart farther from the Kohathite clan to begin the priestly line in Israel.

God's mercy toward the Levites is made evident by the fact that they were not completely excluded from all forms of ministry in the new temple. Nevertheless, because of the Levites' sins, which they led the Israelites into, they will be forbidden to serve as priests. Instead, they will perform tasks related to the temple's daily operation (vss. 12-14). Under David, the Levites were given a very active role in the ministry and worship of Israel (see 1 Chron. 15:16; 16:4; 23:28-31).

The future for the priestly line of Zadok, descended from the priestly branch of the tribe of Levi, was quite different from that of the rest of the Levites. Zadok was the son of Ahitub, a descendant of Aaron's son Eleazar. During Solomon's reign, Zadok was appointed chief priest over the temple (see 1 Kings 1:32-35; 2:35). That was his reward for remaining loyal to Solomon when Adonijah, Solomon's half brother, sought to make himself king over Israel.

As Zadok was faithful to Solomon, his descendants remained faithful to the Lord even as the other Levites led Israel astray. Therefore, in the future temple they will have an honored place in its worship and ministry. According to the word given through Ezekiel, the Zadokite priests alone will be allowed to enter the sanctuary and act as mediators between God and His people Israel (Ezek. 44:15, 16).

In every age and time, God graciously raises up a remnant of those who faithfully follow Him. Neither

dangerous circumstances nor pressure from a majority who disagree with their stand can keep them from doing the Lord's will. Such, apparently, were the Zadokite priests.

Ask Yourself . . . *What kinds of spiritual pressure have I faced?*



The Attire and Conduct of Levites (44:17-23)

"When [the Levites] enter the gates of the inner court, they are to wear linen clothes; they must not wear any woolen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the temple."

—Ezekiel 44:17

Seemingly mundane laws and requirements, such as designating the type of material to use in making clothing, may seem overly restrictive to modern readers. But these were intended to emphasize the importance of following God's commands and of approaching Him with the utmost respect. Furthermore, just as children gain a sense of safety and security when their parents set well-defined boundaries and limits, the Israelites needed well-defined guidelines of worship as a hedge against the deadly pagan religious practices all around them.

Ezekiel was told that in their future ministry, the priests must wear specific types of clothing.

Linen, a light, cool material, will be the designated material for priestly vestments. Woolen garments will not be allowed because they could cause the priests to perspire, which would be offensive in the sanctuary of the Lord (vss. 17, 18).

Priests will not be allowed to mingle among the people while wearing their priestly robes. If they do so, it could result in the consecration of the people (vs. 19). Everything in the temple will be consecrated or sanctified, that is, set apart for service to the Lord and used for no other purpose. In the levitical sense, if anything or anyone touched that which was consecrated (holy or

sanctified), it also became consecrated (see Exod. 29:37; 30:29). Changing clothes before going out to the people will also help the Israelites to distinguish between holy and common things.

The prohibition against shaving the head or allowing the hair to grow long was because both were signs of mourning (Ezek. 44:20; see Lev. 10:6; 21:5, 10). In the Lord's presence, this behavior will be inappropriate for temple ministers. Perhaps this instruction was also intended to caution priests against extremes in appearance.

The command against drinking wine before ministering in the tem-

TITHES AND OFFERINGS

The people of God were expected to bring the best of the firstfruits and special gifts for the priests (Ezek. 44:30). This offering of the first portion might have been considered a "tithe." The "tithe" in Old Testament times was literally a tenth of an individual's accumulated wealth. That wealth, according to the Law, consisted of the produce of the land and livestock (Lev. 27:30, 32). One tithe the Israelites were commanded to give went to the Levites for their inheritance. From that tithe in turn, the Levites were instructed to give a tithe (a tithe of the tithe) to the priests for their livelihood (Num. 18:21-32).

The word "offerings" often meant sacrifices and offerings in general like the burnt (Lev. 1), grain (Lev. 2), fellowship (Lev. 3), and sin (Lev. 4-7) offerings. In Malachi 1:7-14, however, it seems to refer to the portion of the offerings (and tithes) set aside for the priests. Without those tithes and offerings, the priests and Levites would have been required to turn to secular work in order to support themselves.

ple (Ezek. 44:21), reflected the teaching of Leviticus 10:8-9. Earlier in that chapter, Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron's four sons, were consumed by fire from heaven when "they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD" (Lev. 10:1, 2). Neither the reason the fire was "unauthorized" nor the motives of the two priests in offering it are stated. But because the command against drinking was given so soon after this incident, some believe drunkenness may have been a factor.

Certain restrictions will be placed upon marriage for the Zadokite priests serving in the new temple, most of which were first instituted by Moses (Ezek. 44:22; see Lev. 21:7, 13-15). However, the command to marry only virgins of Israelite descent applied only to the high priest in the Mosaic law. In Ezekiel's vision, no mention is even made of a high priest. Perhaps it is because Christ will be the High Priest in the future temple (see Zech. 6:12, 13).

All of the regulations and procedures outlined for the priests were intended to promote holiness among the Israelites. As the Zadokites perform their duties in strict accordance with God's instructions, their actions will teach the people how to tell the difference between what is pleasing to the Lord and what is not (Ezek. 44:23).

Peter declared that Christians are a "holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). And just as the priests will serve as examples of obedience to the Israelites in the

new temple, Peter instructed believers, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet. 2:12; see also Matt. 5:16). In a similar way, Ezekiel's visions of the future were pointing to that day of divine visitation.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I recently fulfilled the role of priest?*



The Priests and Their Service (44:24-31)

"In any dispute, the priests are to serve as judges and decide it according to my ordinances. They are to keep my laws and my decrees for all my appointed festivals, and they are to keep my Sabbaths holy." —Ezekiel 44:24

The laws recorded here were first given to Israel in Exodus and Leviticus after the Israelites were led by Moses out of Egypt. God left nothing to chance. Because of these instructions, the priests knew exactly what was expected of them.

Ezekiel had already said that priests will be teachers of the people by strictly adhering to God's requirements for worship in the new temple (see vs. 23). But they will also act as judges among the people, basing their decisions upon

divine law. Further duties of the priests will include initiating feasts at the proper time, and ensuring that Sabbath observances are not defiled or desecrated (vs. 24).

Since death, according to Mosaic law, resulted in ritual or ceremonial defilement, priests were prohibited from going anywhere near the dead. An exception was made, however, for close relatives (see Lev. 21:1-4). But even then, ritual cleansing and a waiting period were required, with a sin offering to precede ministry in the sanctuary (see Num. 6:9-11; 19:13-19; Lev. 5:3, 6). All of these regulations will apply to priests serving in the new temple (Ezek. 44:25-27).

The picture these laws and decrees paint is of a God who is consistent in His commands and precise in what He requires of His children. Through the ages, human rulers often proved to be cruel and unpredictable in dealing with their subjects. But the Lord's ways are always just and fair. With every law or decree, God offers divine assistance to obey it.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I feel like there are any commands of God that I don't have the ability to follow?*

The high position the priests will hold as God's ministers is emphasized by the fact that the only land they will possess in the new Israel is that around the temple (see 45:4). God Himself will be their only inheritance. But He is the best inheritance for which they or anyone else could ever hope. Whether in the

past, present, or future, the needs of the Lord's children are all met in Him (44:28-30).

The everyday needs of the priests will be met by the offerings of God's people, just as the needs of ministers are met today. Ministers are entitled to the support of those to whom they minister. Because the offering is in fact to the Lord, only the best is worthy of presenting to His servants. The reminder that priests were not permitted to eat animals found dead or killed by predators, may have been a caution to worshipers not to bring those as their offerings (vs. 31).

Ask Yourself . . . *How does my giving reflect my values?*

Ezekiel 45—48 in Brief

In Ezekiel 45, allotments of the new land reserved for the priests, Levites, the whole house of Israel, and the prince were delineated. Next, Ezekiel gave the Israelite princes God's directions for proper conduct toward the people of Israel. Finally, the prophet related instructions on the required preparation and procedure for presenting offerings and celebrating holy days.

One of the most impressive descriptions in the entire Book of Ezekiel, is that of the river that flowed from the temple in the new land (Ezek. 47:1-12; see also Joel 3:18, Zech. 14:8; Rev. 22:1, 2). Wherever the river went, it gave life. Whether the river is only symbolic

or represents a literal feature of a restored Israel, it is surely a beautiful picture of the life-giving power of Christ.

Ezekiel revealed the boundaries of the new Israel and indicated the apportionment of the land among the 12 tribes, the priests and Levites, and the prince. The prophet concluded

his vision and prophecies with a description of “the city” of Jerusalem in the new land. The city will be six miles in circumference, with 12 gates, each bearing the name of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. But the most remarkable thing about the city is its name: “THE LORD IS THERE” (48:35). This will indeed be the City of God.

11

Daniel's Background

Daniel 1

a Deportation to Babylon (1:1-7)

The king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility.... Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

—Daniel 1:3, 6

While Ezekiel prophesied to the exiles on the outskirts of Babylon, Daniel became one of King Nebuchadnezzar's most trusted advisors in the royal court. Though he was highly favored and greatly honored by the king, Daniel's ministry at the highest levels of government was characterized by humility and a complete lack of interest in personal power or prestige. It was on his knees that Daniel conquered kings and prophesied the rise and fall of world empires. Daniel's life is a model of what persistent prayer and unwavering faith can accomplish.

Daniel was born in the middle of good King Josiah's reign, and grew

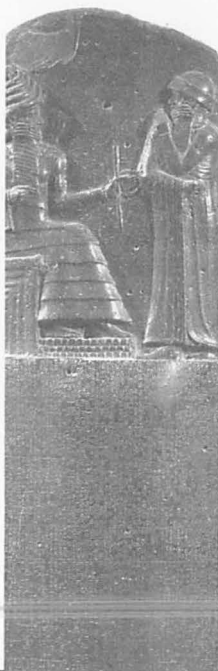
up under his religious reforms (see 2 Kings 22—23). During that time, Daniel probably heard Jeremiah, whom he later quoted (see Dan. 9:2). When Judah fell and Josiah was killed in a battle with Egypt in 609 B.C., Josiah's eldest son Jehoiakim was made king of Judah by Pharaoh Neco. For four years Judah was an Egyptian vassal nation until Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish in 605 B.C.

That same year, the Babylonian king swept into Judah and captured Jerusalem. He had Jehoiakim, who was in the third year of his reign, carried off to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also ordered treasures from the temple in Jerusalem sent back home and placed in "the temple of his god" (1:1, 2). The "god" referred to was probably the chief Babylonian god Bel, also called Marduk.

In keeping with a common practice of the time, Nebuchadnezzar had the best educated, most attractive, most capable and talented among Judah's citizens sent back to Babylon. In essence, only the poorer, uneducated people were left behind to populate conquered lands (see 2 Kings 24:14). Included among those deported from Judah to

Babylon, were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan. 1:3, 6).

It had to be disheartening for Daniel and his companions to see their country conquered, the temple plundered, and many families and friends torn apart by the deportation. Perhaps we share some of the same feelings when tragedy strikes the Christian community. Our spirit is wounded when we see a church conquered by callous indifference to holy living, ripped apart by divisiveness, or plundered by pride or prejudice. But when calamity



Hammurabi's Stele

strikes the people of God today, faith's response is to trust in God's sovereign control over everything that happens. Daniel and his companions knew the true meaning of such trust.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I trust God?*

Nebuchadnezzar commanded Ashpenaz, who was in charge of the king's court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites. The king specifically wanted to see members of the "royal

DEPORTED

Daniel and his friends were among those who were deported from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:3-6). The majority of the greatest Middle Eastern empires of ancient times routinely deported or dispersed large segments of the population of conquered nations. One of the earliest references to this practice comes from the eighteenth-century B.C. law code of Babylonian King Hammurabi. Included with the 250 laws inscribed on the seven-foot black diorite stele pictured above, is the king's curse upon any ruler who broke his laws. Hammurabi called for "the destruction of [the lawbreaker's] city, the dispersion of his people . . . the disappearance of his name and memory from the land!"

Often, deportees from the upper classes were incorporated into the population of the ruling empire. This was done for a variety of reasons. First, it nourished the loyalty of subject peoples as they were gradually absorbed into the new culture. Second, it improved the conquering nation's pool of upper class workers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it denied the lower class citizens left behind in conquered countries the leadership of those most likely to plot rebellion.

family," referring to princes descended from David, and others who came from the ranks of nobility. Nebuchadnezzar was obviously looking for the "cream of the crop" among the captives. He wanted young men of such physical and mental superiority that they would be "qualified" for service to him (vss. 3, 4a).

Ashpenaz was charged with teaching the young men the "language and literature of the Babylonians" with the intent of assimilating them into their new culture. In addition to this, they were to undergo an intensive three-year study program to prepare them for royal service. The course of study most likely included mathematics, history, astronomy, astrology, agriculture, architecture, law, and magic. During the course of their education, the young men would receive "food and wine" rations directly from the table of the king (vss. 4b, 5).

The number of captives enrolled in the king's educational program is not stated. Only the names of the four young men from Judah are given. All four of the names referred to and honored the God of Israel in some way. In Hebrew, the ending "-el" means "God" and "-iah" is an abbreviation for "Yahweh," commonly translated, "Jehovah." The God-honoring names of the four men could indicate that they all had God-fearing parents. But since their captors wanted their gods to be honored rather than the God of Israel, the names of the four youths were changed (vss. 6, 7).

Daniel, meaning "God is judge,"

was changed to Belteshazzar, translated "May Bel protect his life." Hananiah, meaning "Yahweh is gracious," became Shadrach, possibly translated "Command of Aku" (the moon god). Mishael, meaning "Who is what God is?," was changed to Meshach, which may mean "Who is what Aku is?" Azariah, meaning "Whom Yahweh helps," became Abednego, "Servant of Nebo" (god of writing and vegetation). If changing the names was a ploy to shift the young men's allegiance from the God of Israel to the gods of Babylon, it proved to be a miserable failure.



Devotion to God (1:8-14)

Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.
—Daniel 1:8

Those who were being groomed for service in the king's court were treated like athletes in training. They received the best of everything, including food and drink from the king's own table. But because Daniel was certain the king's provisions would bring ritual defilement, he resolved not to partake of them.

With boldness and courage Daniel asked Ashpenaz for permission

not to eat the king's food or drink his wine. Evidently, Daniel's three companions shared his resolve and made the same commitment as well. It is clear from this, that the

The Evening Meal

The early Israelites were accustomed to eating a simple evening meal. It usually featured only vegetables or lentil stew (see Gen. 25:29, 34; Dan. 1:12). This was served in a common pot from which bite-sized portions of food were scooped up, using thin pieces of bread as "spoons."

Meat was served with meals only on special occasions. Festivals and sacrifice days often meant meat would be added to the stew pot. Fruit, either fresh or dried, was the normal desert entree that topped off the evening meal.



exceptional intelligence and physical appearance of the four young men from Judah, were more than matched by their fidelity to God and devotion to divine principles (vs. 8).

Daniel's concern undoubtedly centered on the realization that the king's food was not prepared in compliance with the law of Moses. Even the simple fact that it was prepared by Gentiles rendered it unclean. The king's diet surely included pork and other entrees that were forbidden by the Mosaic law (see Lev. 11). Furthermore, the Gentile monarch's food and wine would have been offered to Babylonian gods before they reached his table. Consuming anything offered to pagan gods was strictly forbidden in Exodus 34:15.

Daniel knew full well what God's law said concerning acceptable food and drink. He therefore resolved not to defile himself by breaking that law. The word "resolve" is a strong term signifying a determined, committed stand. When Daniel took this stand, it was simply the natural result of a life-long determination to be obedient to God's will in every situation.

How often are we tempted or pressured to compromise our Christian principles? The pull of the world to be more like those around us is unrelenting. To combat such strong temptation, it is not enough to merely "desire," or "want," or "try" to live a good Christian life. Like Daniel, living in obedience to the will of God requires a healthy dose of "resolve."

Ask Yourself . . . *How has my spiritual resolve been tested recently?*

Even though God had caused Ashpenaz to be favorably disposed toward Daniel, he was nevertheless reluctant to grant the Israelite's request. The physical well-being, as well as the intellectual development of the court trainees, had been entrusted to Ashpenaz by the king. So the chief official knew that if their health failed, as their poor physical appearance would indicate, his head would roll, and so would theirs (Dan. 1:9, 10).

Since he got nowhere with Ashpenaz, Daniel asked the guard placed over them by the chief official to put him and his friends on a 10-day trial diet of vegetables and water. The Hebrew word for vegetables meant "sown things," thus grains would also have been included. Since no vegetables were designated unclean by the law of Moses, there was no danger of defilement with this diet (vss. 11, 12).

The guard agreed to Daniel's proposal. Perhaps he was reassured by Daniel's confidence that the Israelites would fare better on the vegetarian diet than those who ate the king's food. In any case, he probably reasoned that 10 days was not enough time for the health of the four youths to suffer any permanent damage (vss. 13, 14).

Without compromising his principles or lowering his standards, Daniel managed to negotiate his way to an acceptable solution

to a difficult problem. Daniel undoubtedly petitioned the Lord for divine guidance in this matter. That he received God's assistance is obvious. Daniel's lesson to us in this passage is to trust the Lord's leading in difficult situations without compromising biblical principles.



Appointment to Royal Service (1:15-21)

The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hana-niah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service.

—Daniel 1:19

At the end of the 10-day trial, the four on the vegetarian diet were the picture of health. They looked more vigorous and fit than those who had eaten the king's food. Thus reassured, the guard allowed the young men to continue eating their choice of food rather than the king's provisions (vss. 15, 16).

This incident illustrates the truth that God blesses those who obey and trust Him. Perhaps the lesson was not lost on the Israelite people as a whole. They had disobeyed God's laws and were severely judged because of it. Their nation was destroyed, and they were now captives.

Daniel and his friends, on the other hand, obeyed God by refusing

to eat Nebuchadnezzar's food. They did this even though they knew their stand might cost them their lives. But because of their faithfulness and obedience, the four youths experienced God's blessing, and continued to thrive even in a hostile, ungodly environment.

Ask Yourself . . . *How would a spiritually hostile environment affect my faith?*

While Daniel and his three friends were being groomed for service in the royal court, God was preparing them for service to Himself and to His people. The Lord gave the four Israelites "knowledge and understanding." They had a special ability to reason clearly and logically, and to approach any subject with insight and discernment. Under royal tutelage and with divine assistance, the four youths excelled in a wide range of subjects in the arts and sciences. Daniel, however, surpassed all the other students in a special field. God enabled him to "understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (vs. 17).

Through the ages, people's fascination with dreams and visions has focused especially on omens and oracles which supposedly reveal the future. Unfortunately, such activity has most often been associated with occultic practices. Thus when God's people entered the land of Canaan, where the occult permeated all areas of pagan society, they were strictly forbidden to adopt those practices (see Deut. 18:9-13). Yet in Babylon, Daniel found himself immersed in a

culture where that kind of occultic activity was woven into the fabric of everyday life. By God's Spirit and special commission, Daniel was able to interpret dreams without being tainted by any occultic associations.

At the conclusion of the three-year educational program implemented by Nebuchadnezzar, Ashpenaz brought all the court trainees, including Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah, before the king for their "final exam." On the basis of the oral examination that followed, the king graduated the four Israelites at the top of their class and enrolled them in his service. The Babylonian monarch found these four godly young men not only to be the "best and brightest" among the trainees, but also "ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom" (Dan. 1:18-20).

The term "ten times" was an expression in the Old Testament meaning "many times" (see Gen. 31:7; Num. 14:22; Job 19:3). "Magicians" was perhaps a general designation for all practitioners of the occult. "Enchanters" may refer to men who performed exorcisms by reciting special spells.

In addition to "magicians" and "enchanters," in the next chapter and elsewhere, reference is made to "sorcerers," "astrologers," and "diviners." But all of these seem to be covered by the ironic designation "wise men" (Dan. 2:12-14). Most cultures in the ancient world had an elite group of well-educated men whose counsel and advice

Daniel was given a special ability by God to understand dreams and visions (Dan. 1:17). It was commonly believed in ancient times that the gods spoke to human beings in dreams. Divine guidance was anticipated and sometimes actively sought through the medium of heaven-sent visions. In addition to the Babylonians, this was part of the culture of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Israelites.

Dreams and visions are often regarded as distinct. Dreams are usually associated with experiences of the night while a person is sleeping. Visions are thought of as occurring while a person is either awake or in a trance state. But in Scripture, the terms "dream" and "vision" are often used interchangeably or together to describe the same experience (see Dan. 2:19, 28; 7:1, 2). When God spoke through dreams and visions, the time of day or whether a person was asleep or awake was of little importance. What was important was the divine message.

was highly regarded and widely sought after, especially by kings. The "wisdom" of such men was usually derived from many sources, most of which were connected with the occult or other pagan rites and rituals.

Such men were among the king's closest advisors. They were glib, master communicators who knew how to impress the king with high-sounding messages from phony gods. Next to the true wisdom and knowledge imparted by the God of Israel, the best the occult specialists could offer looked anemic and uninspired.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah achieved prominence even though forced to live in a foreign land and culture. They honored God by applying themselves to their studies and striving for excellence in everything they did. But they honored Him most by their dedicated prayer, unwavering trust, and steadfast loyalty to godly convictions.

Our "foreign culture" may be a new workplace or different neighborhood. No matter what the changes or circumstances are that make us feel like we have landed in a foreign culture, the principles that helped four Israelite youths not only to survive but thrive, can do the same for us today. God honors those who honor Him, no matter where they are or what challenges they face.

Ask Yourself . . . *What principles do I count on to help me deal with the changes and challenges in my life?*

Daniel's service in the royal court continued until Cyrus overthrew the Babylonian empire in 539 B.C. (1:21). Other kings would come and go between Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. But it mattered little to Daniel which earthly monarch he was compelled to serve at any given time. His allegiance was to the King of all the earth. To God alone would Daniel kneel in prayer, bow in worship, and look for wisdom and guidance.

The first chapter of Daniel teaches several important practical lessons. The first lesson is the value of discernment. The four youths knew exactly what was wrong with eating the king's food. Most likely, they learned this from pious parents (Deut. 6:4-9). Because of their early training in godly living, the young men knew precisely what they had to do the moment the crisis presented itself. Resisting temptation is easier and more effective if our principles are established ahead of time. The very moment at which temptation presents itself is a poor time to take a crash course in convictions.

The second lesson we learn from Daniel and his friends is the true character of courage. They were not afraid to speak up when their prin-

ciples were challenged. But it was more than just talk. The guard was right. Their refusal to eat the king's food could have cost them their lives. The same courage of conviction was revealed later in a fiery furnace and den of lions.

The third lesson is the power of perseverance laced with humility and common sense. Daniel and his companions were determined to overcome any obstacle in order to follow God. With respect and humility, Daniel presented his request to Ashpenaz that he not be made to defile himself with the king's food. But when Ashpenaz refused, in quiet persistence, Daniel went to the guard and proposed a test that was both reasonable and feasible.

Many Christians seem to believe that God has called them to be either meek and mild milquetoasts, or loud, obnoxious, "in your face" witnesses for Christ. Neither approach seems to be very effective. God wants us to hold to our convictions with courage, and to witness for Him with love, humility, and a healthy dose of common sense. The lives of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, proved that divine wisdom is the best possible guide. Daniel demonstrated what wisdom coupled with quiet confidence and gentle persuasion can accomplish.

12

Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

Daniel 2—7

a The Dream Concealed from Nebuchadnezzar (2:1-13)

The king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means." —Daniel 2:2, 3

Nebuchadnezzar summoned astrologers to interpret his disturbing dream (Dan. 2:1, 2). Astrologers supposedly observed omens and signs in the movements of the stars. Since the stars were assigned to various gods and goddesses, astrological interpretations and predictions were attached to the will of the gods.

The images on this Babylonian boundary stone represented several different gods. These were the source of the signs of the zodiac. Thus the astrology practiced today is firmly rooted in the pagan religion of ancient Babylon.

God gave Daniel a unique gift. He endowed the young man from Judah with the ability to "understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (Dan. 1:17). Because of this, Nebuchadnezzar came to depend on Daniel to interpret the meaning of mystical revelations from heaven. Thus Daniel served as a light to the Gentile world (see Isa. 42:6; 49:6).



He was the Lord's communication channel to pagan peoples who knew virtually nothing about the God of Israel.

Not long after Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylon, troubling dreams began to give him sleepless nights. Since Daniel later interpreted only one "dream" rather than several "dreams," apparently the king's dream was a recurrent one. Nebuchadnezzar was disturbed by the dream, presumably because he felt that it was highly significant in some way (vss. 1, 3).

The king, hoping to discover the dream's meaning, sent for all of the wise men in his kingdom (vs. 2). In addition to the "magicians" and "enchanters," discussed in the previous lesson, Nebuchadnezzar summoned "sorcerers and astrologers." "Sorcerers" were probably those who claimed the ability to cast spells. "Astrologers," who were evidently an order of priests, looked to the stars to foretell the future.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I drawn to horoscopes? Why or why not?*

Normally, the king's counselors were able to give some credible sounding interpretation of a vision or dream as long as they knew its content. After all, these were intelligent, well-educated men, adept at giving the king what seemed like wise and learned counsel regarding even the most difficult of matters. If this were not true, they would never have risen to the rank of royal advisors in the first place.

However, it was different this

time. For reasons not stated, Nebuchadnezzar was determined that his advisors first tell him what the dream was and then explain its meaning. As added incentive, the king promised great rewards if the wise men could meet his demands. But if they failed, they would be butchered and their houses demolished (vss. 4-6). It was not at all uncommon for the cruel rulers of that time to have those who displeased them dismembered.

It is unlikely, as some Bible scholars have suggested, that Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten his dream. If that were so, the wise men could simply have made up a dream and pretended to give its meaning. It is much more probable that the king really intended to find out just how "wise" his advisors really were. If they were ignorant about the content of his dream, then what other matters were they ignorant about? If they could not even reveal past events, then how could they possibly reveal the future?

Nebuchadnezzar became angry and impatient when the astrologers continued to press him to reveal the content of his dream. He accused them of stalling for time so they could fabricate an answer that would save their lives. The wise men, frustrated by the king's tactic and unyielding stand, insisted that what the king asked was humanly impossible and unprecedented. They protested further that only the gods could do what he requested, "and they do not live among humans" (vss. 7-11).

Under the strain of the moment, the king's advisors made a stunningly candid admission. They were clueless about what the will of the gods was. In the past, they pretended to deliver messages straight from the gods to the king. But here, they as much as admitted that they were frauds who did not speak for the gods of Babylon at all. How could they speak for the Babylonian gods? They were as phony as the advisors.

When the royal advisors confessed that they could not comply with Nebuchadnezzar's demands, the king became so furious he issued a decree that all the wise men in Babylon be executed. Since Daniel and his three companions were counted in that select group, men were dispatched to carry out their death sentence (vss. 12, 13). But unlike the powerless gods the other wise men served, the God of Daniel and his friends was more than capable of meeting the king's seemingly impossible challenge.



The Dream Revealed to Daniel (2:14-23)

During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven.

—Daniel 2:19

It is clear that Daniel was unaware of what had taken place regarding the wise men and Nebuchadnezzar's

dream. When Arioch approached him to carry out the king's death decree, the prophet asked, with wisdom and tact, what was going on. After Arioch's explanation, Daniel boldly requested a stay of execution from Nebuchadnezzar "so that he might interpret the dream" for the king (vss. 14-16).

Why Daniel was not present with the other wise men previously is not stated. Perhaps he stayed away because he wished to keep himself undefiled by their pagan magic. Whatever the reason, because of his high position and favor with Nebuchadnezzar, he was able to go directly to the king and make his request.

Daniel's boldness here is evident in two ways. First, Nebuchadnezzar had issued a death warrant for all the wise men, which obviously included Daniel. Second, Daniel asked for a delay to come up with an interpretation of the king's dream. One of the main reasons the king had issued the death decree in the first place was because of the perceived stalling tactics of the wise men (see vss. 8, 9).

Nebuchadnezzar's high esteem for Daniel was revealed by his granting the prophet's request. Daniel immediately went home and asked Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, to join him in petitioning God. They prayed for mercy regarding the execution order and for revelation concerning the meaning of the dream (vss. 17, 18). In times of need and trouble, we should seek out other Christians with whom we

can join in a concert of prayer to the Lord (see Matt. 18:18, 19).

The godly character of Daniel in times of crisis is a remarkable lesson for believers today. When we are confronted with a difficult situation, perhaps involving serious wrong

or injustice, with God's help we can face these challenges with tact, wisdom, confidence and courage. Like Daniel and his three friends, we serve the same all-loving, all-powerful God who welcomes the cries of His children for assistance.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I usually respond to sudden crises?*

God answered the prayers of the four Israelites, apparently that very night. He revealed the content and meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel responded by lifting a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to "the God of heaven," whom he acknowledged as the source of all "wisdom" and "power" (Dan. 2:19, 20).

God's power is seen in His control of the seasons and in His authority over the kings of nations. This included the ruler of Babylon. Such a conviction would explain why Daniel was not afraid to approach Nebuchadnezzar so boldly (vs. 21a).

The wisdom of God is evidenced by His imparting "wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning." It is also demonstrated when He reveals things that are mysterious and concealed by shining the light of His knowledge into the darkness of the unknown. All things are clear and known by God, while much is "deep," "dark," and "hidden" to the human mind. Daniel gave God complete credit for revealing the secret locked in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The prophet claimed no special insight for himself at all (vss. 21b-23).

INTERPRETATION, PLEASE?

On certain occasions when God spoke to people through dreams and visions, as with Nebuchadnezzar's dream, an interpreter was needed to unlock the meaning. Such was the case also in Egypt where Joseph "the dreamer" (Gen. 37:5-11, 19), revealed God's messages to Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker (Gen. 40), and to Pharaoh himself (Gen. 41).

But there were other instances where no interpreter was necessary. After the "wise men" or "Magi from the east" visited the Christ child, an angel appeared to them in a dream and warned them not to return to King Herod (Matt. 2:1-12).



The Dream Revealed to Nebuchadnezzar (2:24-35)

"There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in your bed are these."

—Daniel 2:28

With divinely inspired knowledge about Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel went to Arioch and told him to stay the executions of the wise men because he was prepared to interpret the king's dream. Without delay, Daniel was ushered into the king's presence. Arioch falsely claimed credit for finding someone to interpret the monarch's dream, when in fact it was Daniel who went to Arioch. Apparently the executioner expected to be rewarded, or at least to gain the king's favor (vss. 24, 25).

Nebuchadnezzar made the same demands of Daniel that he made of the other wise men. He asked if Daniel could both reveal the content of the dream and its interpretation. In essence, Daniel replied that no wise man in league with false gods could unravel the mystery. However, said Daniel, with the aid of the one true "God in heaven," he could interpret the divine message to the king (vss. 26-28). Once again, Daniel reserved no credit for himself.

Daniel stated from the outset that the message of the dream was about future events (vs. 29). It was a panoramic presentation of the divinely appointed Gentile nations that would successively dominate Israel from the time of Nebuchadnezzar until the coming of the Messiah.

Daniel, with characteristic humility, informed Nebuchadnezzar that he had received this revelation because of no special ability of his own (vs. 30). Unlike Arioch, who was quick to take credit for something he did not deserve, Daniel rejected every opportunity for personal glory. At every turn, he exalted God and glorified Him. It is all too easy to take credit for what God does through us. But like Daniel, we must be careful not to rob God of the honor due Him.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I see God as the source of my skills and abilities?*

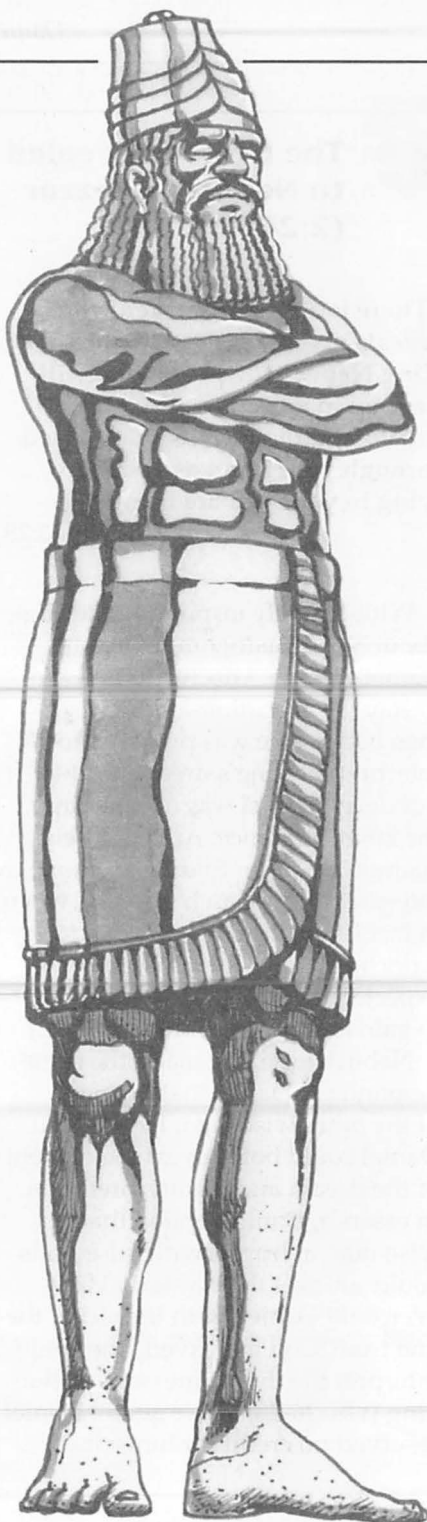
Daniel turned first to a description of what Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream, and then to its meaning. The dream was fairly concise and straightforward. Daniel told the king that he saw a gigantic statue, visibly awesome in every respect. It may be implied that as Nebuchadnezzar stood before the statue, he appeared quite small by comparison (vs. 31).

Daniel described the statue to the king as a composite of four metals with some clay. It had a gold head, silver chest and arms, bronze belly and thighs, iron legs, and feet that were part iron and part clay (vss. 32, 33). That was the visual aspect of the

"enormous, dazzling," and perhaps frightening image the king saw in his dream.

As Daniel revealed the rest of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it became apparent that the statue was not the main character in the mystical drama. A rock, carved out by an unseen, nonhuman force, first smashed the iron-clay feet. It seems this started a chain reaction of fissures that shattered the rest of the statue (vss. 34, 35).

The broken pieces of the image were caught up like chaff in the wind and completely blown away. In the king's vision, all that remained was the rock that shattered the statue. It grew into a "huge mountain and filled the whole earth" (vs. 35). That was the content of the dream. But what did it mean?



d The Dream Explained to Nebuchadnezzar (2:36-49)

"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy."

—Daniel 2:45b

The interpretation of the dream Daniel gave to King Nebuchadnezzar was not about deep spiritual truths. It concerned the progression of political powers in a world the

Artists can only imagine what Nebuchadnezzar's statue actually looked like (Dan. 2:31-35). But it must have been an "awesome" sight indeed. The image was in the form of a man, probably Babylonian in appearance. Since the head represented the Babylonian empire, the face may well have been that of Nebuchadnezzar himself.

Babylonian monarch understood. These were powers which would rule over the Israelites and their land by God's design and under His authority.

Daniel revealed the meaning of the dream's basic components to the king. Concerning the statue, the head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of the Babylonian empire (626-539 B.C.). His great power was derived directly from God. By divine appointment, Nebuchadnezzar's authority over the known world of that day ("the whole earth," was being used to fulfill God's plans for His people [vss. 36-39]).

The silver chest and arms of the statue represented the Medo-Persian empire (539-330 B.C.), which conquered and succeeded Babylon. The bronze belly and thighs stood for Greece, the empire built by Alexander the Great. Alexander defeated the Medo-Persians between 334 and 330 B.C. Finally, the iron legs represented the Roman empire, strongest of all the previous world powers, which conquered the Greeks in 63 B.C. The feet and toes, composed of a mixture of iron and clay, depicted

the later disintegration of the great empire of the Romans (vss. 39-43).

When we see evil world leaders in our time who live long and seemingly prosperous lives, we may wonder if God is really in control of world governments as Daniel claimed (see vs. 21). But we should remember that Daniel himself lived in an age of unbelievably brutal rulers. Yet the prophet was certain that the nations of the world are indeed governed according to the purposes of God.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I seen God use evil people to accomplish His purposes?*

After Daniel outlined the future course of Gentile governments, he explained the meaning of the "rock cut out of a mountain." He told the king that the rock represented the coming kingdom of God. That kingdom, which will crush all the others and put a permanent end to human government, will endure forever under the reign of the Messiah (vss. 44, 45a). In Scripture, Christ the Messiah is often referred to as a rock (see Isa. 8:14; 28:16; 1 Pet. 2:6-8).

As he concluded the interpretation of the king's dream, Daniel affirmed that it was a message from God about the future. And since God was the source of his information, Daniel assured the king of the truth of the dream and the trustworthiness of the interpretation (Dan. 2:45b). Obviously, Nebuchadnezzar could attest to the truthfulness of the dream's content. It was the interpretation that had so troubled him.

Daniel 3—7 in Brief

The king was so impressed by Daniel's ability to recall the dream and reveal its mysterious meaning that he honored him in ways usually reserved only for Babylonian gods. In effect, Nebuchadnezzar was worshiping God through His spokesman Daniel. Because the king recognized the Israelite God as the source of Daniel's ability to reveal the meaning of mysteries, he elevated Him above all other gods (vss. 46, 47).

Daniel himself was elevated to high office in Babylon and showered with royal gifts. He was appointed administrator over the province of Babylon, in which the royal court was located, and given authority over all the other wise men. But even amid all the honors and rewards, Daniel did not forget his three friends (vss. 48, 49).

Daniel asked the king to appoint his companions as the actual administrators of the province of Babylon so he could continue serving in the royal court. No doubt Daniel felt he could best serve God and the people of Israel from a position close to the throne. Not long after this, Daniel was able to act as a mediator between the king and newly arrived captives from Judah, Ezekiel among them.

Ask Yourself . . . *How could I put myself in the best possible position to serve the Lord most effectively?*

The third chapter of Daniel relates the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's divine rescue from a fiery furnace, while Daniel is protected from hungry lions in chapter six. Both stories teach marvelous lessons about the character of devotion to the Lord.

In the first story, three faithful men were thrown into the fire because they refused to fall on their knees and worship the king's golden image. They were determined to remain obedient, whether or not God physically delivered them. In the second story, devout Daniel was thrown to the lions because he refused to stop falling on his knees in prayer.

In Daniel 4 and 5, two Babylonian kings receive messages from God. First, Nebuchadnezzar's vision of an enormous tree, which revealed his arrogance and pride, resulted in a divinely caused mental disorder that lasted for seven years. Then Belshazzar, who succeeded Nebuchadnezzar as ruler of Babylon, saw handwriting on his palace wall which predicted the fall of Babylon to the Medo-Persians. Daniel 7 contains a parallel vision to Nebuchadnezzar's dream regarding the four world empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

13

Daniel's Prayer

Daniel 8—12

Daniel 8 in Brief

Daniel's vision in chapter 8 provided additional information about the Medo-Persian empire, represented by a ram with two long horns. It revealed in some detail the rise and splintering of the Greek empire, depicted as a shaggy, two-horned goat. Under the Medes and Persians, the Jewish exiles were allowed to return home and begin the rebuilding of their homeland. With the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek, the language of the New Testament, was providentially spread throughout the known world.

a The Concern of Daniel (9:1-3)

I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.

—Daniel 9:2b

Daniel's visions have been called by many the keys to all Bible prophecy. They reveal a sovereign God in control of human events, past, present, and future. The Lord is no passive

Darius, King of the Medes and Persians

Darius, ruler of the Persian empire by Median descent, was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom (Dan. 9:1). Media was a region northeast of Babylon. Almost nothing is known about the origins of the ancient people known as the Medes. And only a few words of their language have survived.

Persia, modern Iran, was located south of Media. While the kings of Persia and Babylon had made joint military campaigns into southwest Asia in 559 B.C., 20 years later Darius overthrew Belshazzar to gain control of the Babylonian empire. Belshazzar knew about his own fall in advance because of a handwritten message inscribed on his palace wall (see Dan. 5).

spectator of world affairs. He is the One who holds the destinies of individuals and of nations in the palm of His hand. He knows the beginning from the end. Most assuredly, He knows those who belong to Him.

The events of chapter 9 took place during the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede. That was 539 B.C., the year Babylon was conquered by the Medo-Persians. Daniel had been in captivity for 66 years, since 605 B.C. The last date recorded in the Book of Daniel is 536 B.C., "the third year of Cyrus king of Persia" (10:1).

The rise of the Medo-Persians was a providential act of God. Daniel apparently knew that the rise of Darius paved the way for the return of the Israelites to their homeland. He understood from Jeremiah's prophecies that the 70-year exile begun by the "desolation of Jerusalem," was nearing its end (9:1, 2; see Jer. 25:11, 12; 29:10).

Daniel's expectation for his people drove him to his knees in prayer. He cried out to the Lord first in confession, and then in petition. Daniel approached the throne of grace with fasting, adorned in sackcloth and ashes. All three of these were signs of deep repentance or personal grief and loss (Dan. 9:3; see Ezek. 27:29-31).

Ask Yourself . . . *What usually moves me to pray?*

Daniel knew how to pray effectively. Unreserved confession of sin opened his heart to the Lord. Complete submission to God's will prepared the prophet for divine direction. Like Daniel, we should

first go to the Lord in confession, then listen with an attitude of submission and openness to hear what He wants to say to us.



The Confession of Daniel (9:4-14)

"We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws."

—Daniel 9:5

Daniel seemed to comprehend fully that the exile in Babylon was God's judgment for Israel's sin. He understood too what God's covenant with His people required if they were to receive forgiveness, restoration, and divine blessing. The nation had to confess its sin and obey the commands of God (vss. 4, 5).

In this knowledge, Daniel confessed the sins of the people, not once but four times (vss. 5, 8, 11, 15). He included himself as if he were personally involved in Israel's wickedness, rebellion, and disobedience. Even though God had graciously sent the prophets to turn His people back, the nation as a whole had ignored their message. According to Daniel, all Israel was guilty before God (vss. 6, 8-11).

When trouble comes, it is all too easy to point the finger of blame and guilt toward others while excusing ourselves. It is difficult to imagine

anyone among the Israelites more righteous and blameless than Daniel. Yet he was the one on his knees begging God's forgiveness for his sin and that of his people. If you want renewal and revival in your church, the first step is to look into a mirror and ask the Lord to begin with the one you see.

Ask Yourself . . . *Could I identify in prayer with the sins of other believers?*

After Daniel acknowledged the sins of Israel, he acknowledged the righteousness of God (vss. 7, 14; see vs. 16). He implied that God was just in judging His people for their unfaithfulness by exiling them to other countries. The Israelites could blame only their own sin for the great shame this divine discipline had brought upon them (vss. 7, 8).

Daniel also acknowledged that, in spite of Israel's sin, God had shown mercy and forgiveness toward His people (vss. 9, 10; see vs. 18). God shows mercy even to rebels. We should never allow past sins to keep us away from God.

It was because of the nation's stubborn refusal to obey the Lord that the "curses" and "judgments" enumerated by Moses in Deuteronomy 28:15-68, had fallen upon the Israelites. Yet even in spite of the unparalleled "disaster" brought upon the nation, the people still were not turning away from their sin and submitting themselves to God's "truth" (Dan. 9:11-14).

God had given His people a very simple choice. Obey Him and be blessed. Disobey Him and suffer

curses and judgments. Because Israel had chosen the latter course, the people were dispersed and Jerusalem fell. These punishments were meant to bring God's people back to Him, but they refused to respond.

Often God uses circumstances and other people to get our attention and draw us back to Him. In difficult times we should be especially sensitive to how God may want to speak to us through them.



The Petition of Daniel (9:15-19)

"Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary."

—Daniel 9:17

Daniel had confessed the sins of Israel. Next he approached the Lord with his petition. As in his confession, Daniel opened with a statement of God's greatness and of the people's sin.

The greatness of God was demonstrated in a mighty way before other nations when He delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. But Israel's sin and judgment had since caused neighboring nations to look upon God's people with scorn (vss. 15, 16). Suggested here is the idea that the fortunes of a nation, whether good or bad, were an indicator of its



god's power and might. In the same way, our conduct makes a statement to others about the God we follow.

Ask Yourself . . . *What would people say about God just by observing me as one of His followers?*

Daniel pleaded with God to act in accordance with His righteousness, to end the discipline of His people and to free them from their captivity. This request for the removal of God's judgment was the negative side of Daniel's petition. The positive side was a request for favor, mercy, and forgiveness (vss. 17, 19).

The prophet asked the Lord to give heed to his "prayers and petitions." One of those petitions, in essence, was a veiled request for

restoration of the Jerusalem temple. Daniel suggested that by doing that, God's reputation among other nations would be favorably affected. God's "name" represented His character and reputation.

Daniel also petitioned the Lord to take a hard look at Jerusalem itself, known also as "the city of God" (see Ps. 46:4; Rev. 3:12). He wanted the Lord to take special note of the desolate condition of the holy city. Daniel emphasized that these requests were not made because of the people's righteousness, but because of God's "great mercy" (Dan. 9:18).

Daniel knew that the Israelites were in no position to demand anything from God. They deserved His wrath, not His mercy. Therefore, he



Daniel pleaded with God to withhold His wrath from Jerusalem, His city, His holy hill (Dan. 9:16). This is a picture of modern Jerusalem on the hill upon which it was built.

the mercy of God's court. But even then, Daniel's first concern was for the Lord's reputation. For God's sake, Daniel called upon Him to act quickly on behalf of the city and the people who bore His name. Again, Daniel's motive in requesting action in these matters was to bring glory to God, not to Israel or himself (vs. 19).

d The Seventy "Sevens" (9:20-27)

only pleaded for the Lord to listen to his petitions and take a careful look at the sanctuary and city that had lain in ruins for decades.

God shows mercy and graciously bestows blessings upon us because it pleases Him to do so, not because we deserve it. Many people, believers and unbelievers alike, act as if God is somehow obligated to grant any and all requests made of Him. But since sin placed all humanity under a death sentence, it would be unwise indeed to demand that a just and holy God give us what we deserve.

The passion of Daniel's heart was released at the end of his prayer. Since Israel had no righteousness to present before the Lord, Daniel threw himself and his people on

"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place."

—Daniel 9:24

Daniel reviewed the content of his prayer once again. He had started by confessing his own sins and the sins of Israel. While nothing negative is recorded about Daniel in Scripture, He still identified himself with the sins of Israel. In the petition of his prayer, he had asked God to consider the state of "his holy hill," meaning Jerusalem (vs. 20).

Previously, Daniel had requested that the Lord not delay acting upon his prayer (see vs. 19). The answer to his prayer could hardly have come more quickly. While Daniel was still praying, his prayer was interrupted by the angel Gabriel who had appeared to him earlier with an interpretation of the ram and goat vision (vs. 21; see 8:15, 16).

Gabriel got right to the point of his visit. He had come to give Daniel insight and understanding about God's plans for Israel. Because of the high esteem God had for Daniel, Gabriel was dispatched with an answer to the prophet's prayer at the very moment he had begun to pray. God had a very important message for Daniel about the future of his people (9:22-23).

God still answers the prayers of His children today. But there is a condition. He expects us to be walking in obedience to His will when we come to Him with our requests (see John 15:7). If there is unconfessed sin in our lives, the first prayer the Lord wants to hear from us is a prayer of confession and repentance. Then the way is clear for prayers of petition. That was Daniel's practice when he approached the throne of grace.

Ask Yourself . . . *What form do my prayers usually take?*

Gabriel's opening remarks to Daniel revealed two important things about this message from God. It concerned God's program for Daniel's "people" and Daniel's "city," meaning the Israelites and the city of

Jerusalem. While previous prophecies focused on Gentile nations, this one was about Israel.

Gabriel also revealed that God's program for Israel would be completed in "seventy sevens" (Dan. 9:24a). There has been much disagreement and debate among Bible scholars about the meaning of the numbers in this vision and what they represent. Some believe they are only figurative and therefore have no importance as time periods. Others take the numbers to refer to literal periods of time.

Since Daniel had already been thinking about Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years for the completion of the "desolation of Jerusalem" (see vs. 2), he would naturally have understood the "sevens" to signify actual years. Thus "seventy sevens" would equal 490 years. In Old Testament times, the number seven was highly significant and used as a common multiplier (see Lev. 25:1-12).

Daniel was told that during the course of the 490 years, God will do several things for Israel (Dan. 9:24b). He will end the people's rebellion and sin, make atonement for their "wickedness" (with the cross of Christ), and establish a permanent state of righteousness (at Christ's return to establish His kingdom). Furthermore, he will "seal up vision and prophecy" (by fulfilling the covenant promises to Israel), and "anoint the Most Holy Place" (enthroning Messiah as Israel's King).

Gabriel unfolded God's 490-year program for Israel using key events as chronological beginning

and ending points (vss. 25, 27a). He said the program would begin when a "word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem," and end when "the Anointed One" returns. It would be divided into three separate blocks of time.

The first block of time, 7 "sevens" or 49 years, covered the period from the "word" to rebuild Jerusalem until its rebuilding was completed "with streets and a trench." Three words or decrees are commonly suggested as the starting point of the prophecy: (1) Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C. (see Ezra 1:1-4); (2) Artaxerxes' decree in 457 B.C. (see Ezra 7:12-26; 9:9); and (3) Artaxerxes Longimanus's decree in 444-445 B.C. (see Neh. 2:1-8).

The second block of time, 62 "sevens" or 434 years, was given as the span of years from Jerusalem's rebuilding until "the Anointed One" returned and was put to death and will have nothing. The "Anointed One" was Christ the Messiah. The Lord came as Israel's Messiah, but with His rejection and death, He was left with "nothing." His eternal kingdom of righteousness would have to come at a future time.

The first two blocks of time add up to 483 years ($49 + 434 = 483$). That leaves the final seven-year period unaccounted for at the time of Christ's death. There are three basic views regarding fulfillment of prophecies involving the "ruler" who will make a covenant with Israel but then brings war with "abomination" and "desolation" to the temple and city of Jerusalem

(Dan. 9:26b, 27; see 12:11; Matt. 24:15).

The first view is that the prophecy was fulfilled in the past by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168-167 B.C., when he sacrificed a pig on the temple altar. The second view sees fulfillment in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Titus in A.D. 70. According to the third view, the ruler is the future Antichrist (see 2 Thess. 2:1-12; Rev. 13:1-10), and the seven years comprise the end times tribulation period (see Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21, 29). Some interpreters see two or even all three of these events in combination as fulfillment of this prophecy.

Regardless of which interpretation is followed, one thing is certain. What Daniel understood from this divine message, and some of his other visions, was far less than anything that has since been suggested. The final chapter of Daniel was a vision regarding events in the end times. But much of it was a puzzle to the prophet. He wrote, "I heard, but I did not understand" (Dan. 12:8).

Daniel diligently gave heed to all that God said, even when his understanding was incomplete. Because it was God's word, it was of the utmost importance to him. There are many things in Scripture we may not fully comprehend. But like Daniel, we can rest secure in the knowledge that our righteous and merciful Lord is in sovereign control of all human events.

Daniel 10—12 in Brief

Daniel received the last of his visions, recorded in chapters 10—12, two years after his people had returned to Israel. God pulled back the curtain of the unseen world just enough for Daniel to catch a glimpse of the conflicts being fought on a spiritual battlefield. God revealed that good and evil supernatural beings struggled to control the

affairs of nations, and would do so up until the very end.

It must have been a great comfort to Daniel to learn that the archangel Michael, the protector prince of Israel, was the defender of God's people. Daniel was told that there was still trouble ahead for Israel. But he was assured that for his people, "everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered" and receive "everlasting life" (Dan. 12:1, 2).

Kings, Dreams, and Interpretations

The Book of Daniel is laid out in topical rather than chronological order. Consequently, there is some chronological backtracking and overlapping that occurs which puts rulers and events out of sequence.

This chart shows who ruled Babylon when each chapter of Daniel was written, along with the major events and themes of the chapters in the year they occurred.

DANIEL INTERPRETS KINGS' DREAMS AND VISIONS

Nebuchadnezzar (Babylonian)	(Date)
Chapter 1—Daniel's training	605 B.C.
Chapter 2—Statue dream	606-605
Chapter 3—Fiery furnace	?
Chapter 4—Tree dream	?

Belshazzar (Babylonian)

Chapter 5—Handwriting on wall	539
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Darius (Mede)

Chapter 6—Daniel in lion's den	539
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ANGEL INTERPRETS DANIEL'S DREAMS AND VISIONS

Belshazzar (Babylonian)	(Date)
Chapter 7—Four beasts vision-dream	553 B.C.
Chapter 8—Ram and goat dream	555

Darius (Mede)

Chapter 9—Seventy "sevens" vision	539
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Cyrus (Persian)

PANORAMIC VISION OF FUTURE:	536
Chapter 10—The messenger	
Chapter 11—The Gentile nations	
Chapter 12—The nation of Israel	



An inscription in the languages of Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian carved on a column in Pasargadae, the Persian capital city of Cyrus the Great, says, "I am Cyrus, Achaemenid king." The Achaemenids were a dynasty of Persian kings that began with Cyrus in 559 B.C. He was killed in battle in 530. It was during the reign of Cyrus that Daniel had his panoramic vision of the future recorded in Daniel 10—12.

Visions, Signs, and Allegories in Ezekiel

V I S I O N S

Name	Revelation	Reference
1. Vision of Living Creatures	Vision of God Shown	1:4-28
2. Vision of the Scroll	Ezekiel's Call	2:9-3:11
3. Vision on the Plain	Ezekiel Silenced	3:22-27
4. Visions of Jerusalem		
a. Idolatry in the temple	Idolatry of Elders Revealed	8:1-18
b. Idolaters slain	Punishment of Sin	9:1-11
c. Glory departs temple	Prelude to Judgment	10:1-22
d. Judgment on leaders	Judgment of Jerusalem	11:1-25
5. Vision of Dry Bones	Restoration of Israel	37:1-14
6. Visions of New Temple and New Israel	Restoration of Israel	40:1-48:35

S I G N S

Name	Symbolized	Reference
1. Sign of Clay Tablet	Siege of Jerusalem	4:1-3
2. Sign of Lying on Side	Duration of Siege	4:4-8
3. Sign of Meager Rations	Famine during Siege	4:9-17
4. Sign of Sword as Razor	Total Destruction of City	5:1-17
5. Sign Baggage/Hole in Wall	Exile to Babylon	12:1-16
6. Sign of Trembling	Fear of Imminent Destruction	12:17-20
7. Sign of Groaning	Fear of Imminent Judgment	21:1-17
8. Sign of Babylonian Sword	Babylonian Destruction	21:18-23
9. Sign of Refining Furnace	Judgment and Refinement	22:17-31
10. Sign of Wife's Death	Mourning over Great Loss	24:15-27
11. Sign of Two Sticks	Reunification of Israel	37:15-28

A L L E G O R I E S

Name	Teaching	Reference
1. The Useless Vine	Sin of People in Jerusalem	15:1-8
2. The Faithless Wife	Faithlessness of God's People	16:1-63
3. The Two Eagles	Egyptian and Babylonian Control	17:1-21
4. The Cedar Shoot	Coming of the Messiah	17:22-24
5. The Two Sisters	Unfaithfulness of Israel/Judah	23:1-49
6. The Cooking Pot	Siege/Destruction of Jerusalem	24:1-14

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UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

is organized according to a systematic, sensible plan that will take you through every book of the Bible.

	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	MARCH	JUNE
2022/23	Philippians, Colossians	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel, Daniel
2023/24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians, Ephesians	Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
2024/25	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians, Jude	Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah
2025/26	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2026/27	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2027/28	Matthew	Judges, Ruth	1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Jeremiah, Lamentations
2028/29	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah., Zeph., Hab., Obad., Hag., Zech., Mal.
2029/30	John	1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles	James 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs

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Next quarter:
Mark