

YOBL

Year of Biblical Literacy

Week 28: Prophets in Exile: Ezekiel Part 1

Daily Reading for Week

- Ezekiel 9-12, Psalm 33
- Ezekiel 13-15, Psalm 34
- Ezekiel 16-18, Psalm 35
- Ezekiel 19-21, Psalm 36
- Ezekiel 22-24, Psalm 37
- Ezekiel 25-27, Psalm 38
- Ezekiel 28-30, Psalm 39
- Read Scripture Video: Ezekiel 1-33
- Minimum Reading: Ezekiel 1, 11, 33

Focus of time together

To hear Ezekiel's awe as he encounters a vision of God's glory and to understand his (and Israel's) grief when God's glory leaves the Temple and when the Temple is destroyed by Babylon.

Opening Prayer

Pray Psalm 13 aloud.

Intro to Discussion

For the past three weeks, we have been reading the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations — two books addressing Israel in different phases of their Babylonian exile. Jeremiah and Lamentations deeply grieve the consequences of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, and at certain points, find hope in the promise of a day when God will once again rescue Israel out of exile.

Ezekiel wrestles with similar questions and realities and does so primarily through vivid and strange visions. In order to equip the prophet for his prophetic task, "the hand of the Lord came on" Ezekiel to give him a (quite bizarre) visual conception of God's glory and cherubim (see Genesis 3:24). He even gets a kind of visionary virtual tour of Jerusalem from his refugee home in Babylon. He describes a scene so awe-inspiring, so overwhelming, it is hard for him to put it into words. He sees a kind of moving vehicle

(think chariot) made of heavenly creatures. Sitting on this vehicle made of heavenly beings, Ezekiel sees a vision of God in the fullness of His glory, sitting on a great sapphire throne. The sapphire description, “lapis lazuli” in some translations, matches a similar experience of Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel when they saw the glory of God in Exodus 24:10: *“Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky”*

This vision of God’s glory is an important narrative thread throughout the Book of Ezekiel, one that reappears multiple times in the beginning, middle, and end. When Ezekiel has a vision in chapters 10-11 of God removing His glory from the Temple, it is portending a monumentally catastrophic moment in Israel’s history. God’s presence and glory had been with them through the Exodus, through their years in the wilderness housed in the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant, and through the years spent conquering the Promised Land. Later, when Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6), God’s glory dwelt in the centre of the Temple. His presence had always been with them, leading them, guiding them, protecting them, and providing for them.

And yet, throughout the prophets there had always been a warning. If Israel did not return to covenant faithfulness, they would be handed over to conquering nations and taken into exile. What’s worse, at a certain point their rescuing God would remove His glory from their presence (Jeremiah 7 is a good example of this kind of language). Ezekiel’s incredible vision in chapter 1 of God’s glory is offset by a foreboding warning. The evil of Israel is so great, warns God, that in addition to the exile they had already experienced at the hands of Babylon, He would soon remove His very presence from the Temple in Jerusalem, leaving it and the city unprotected (Ezekiel 7). This warning becomes reality in Ezekiel 8-11. Ezekiel has a vision of God’s glory, His very presence picking up and leaving first the Temple, then the city of Jerusalem, and finally moving eastwards (an important distinction). Soon afterwards (Ezekiel 33:21-33), the Israelites exiled in Babylon hear that Jerusalem and the Temple had been burned to the ground and utterly destroyed by their captors.

And yet, despite all the warnings and destruction we read about, there are small moments of hope in these chapters in Ezekiel. God’s glory moves out of the city and towards the East, that is, in the direction of Babylon. The text suggests that God is departing from Jerusalem not to completely abandon Israel but to be with His people in exile in Babylon. Ezekiel’s initial vision (Ezekiel 1) describes God surrounded by something like a rainbow, a callback to God’s faithfulness in His Genesis 9 promise to Noah after the flood. As one commentator writes, “What the rainbow asserts is the faithfulness of God even in the midst of overwhelming judgement. It is a sign of God’s self commitment to His promise. God’s judgement must fall on His rebellious people yet because of commitment to His covenant. He will not wipe them out. In the darkness of exile. God’s covenant faithfulness... was Israel’s only hope.”

Whole Group Discussion (45 minutes)

Questions for Listening to Scripture

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

Read Ezekiel 11:14-25. (Note: This chapter describes a portion of a vision that Ezekiel has beginning in chapter 8, where God shows him a scene in Jerusalem and a depiction of God's glory — through a strange cocktail of imagery — coming to the Temple, then departing from it, and exiting Jerusalem altogether.)

1. Ezekiel's repeated visions of God's "glory" might be better thought of as visions of God's presence. The Israelite perspective was that God was present with them because His glory was living near them in the Temple. So when Ezekiel shares his vision of God's glory leaving, this would have meant to a Jew that God's very presence among His people was gone — that He had left, and in His place was an empty vacuum. What do you imagine it would have felt like for an Israelite to even consider this possibility?
2. Three years after Ezekiel's Temple vision, Jerusalem was besieged (chapters 24:1-14). And three years after that, the exiles received news that their capitol city had fallen (chapters 33:21-22). What do you imagine that the Exiles' reaction would have been like, having heard that their city and Temple had actually been destroyed (meaning that God truly had abandoned His dwelling place)?
3. Ezekiel 11:14-21 indicates that in the midst of God's presence leaving, there was still hope for a small remnant of Israelite survivors to one day be restored as a nation again. Is there any way in which you can anticipate or imagine this experience of exile being a refining process, contributing to covenant faithfulness among the Israelite survivors?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1. How have you traditionally thought about God's presence? Where His presence is, the kind of spaces God inhabits, and who He is present with?

Watch the following video from The Bible Project on Heaven & Earth before breaking up into small groups: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zy2AQIK6C5k>

Small Group Discussion (20 minutes)

Questions for Interacting with Scripture

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1. How has exploring this Old Testament Jewish conception of God's presence changed or informed your Christian appreciation of the idea that we are each individual temples of God's Spirit in the world? (See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:18-20, and John 2:19-22.)
2. What questions does the Old Testament view of God's presence leave you with?

Closing Prayer

Prayer