

Study 11: Behold the Day

Introduction. At each crisis point during the long history of salvation, God called a man after His own heart and raised him up to do His work. One such crisis was the conquest of Judah by Babylon, an event that marked a major turning point in the history of God's people. The period of exile that followed (6th Century B.C.) put an immediate end to the political life of the nation.

Up to this point, God's promises to Abraham had been largely interpreted in a material sense. But now they would gradually be understood in a new, more spiritual light. Increasingly, Israel would see herself as having a spiritual mission of bringing the knowledge of the one, true God to the entire world. Because of the intensity with which religious life developed during this period of exile, the people, too, became more like a religious community than a nation. The seventy years of exile, then, brought Israel closer toward realizing the goal God had set for it. And much of this change in its understanding of God's promises and Israel's mission was due, in large part, to the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel the Man. Ezekiel ("God strengthens") was the son of a Jerusalem priest named Buzi, who served in the great Temple of the Holy City. Coming from a priestly family and quite possibly a priest himself at the Jerusalem Temple in the last days of Judah, Ezekiel was deported in 597 B.C. to Babylon along with a group of Judean nobles. It was there that he was called to be a prophet to God's people in exile.

Throughout his ministry Ezekiel, a fearless and dedicated man of God and an ardent patriot, was favored with extraordinary mystical experiences. These experiences can cause Ezekiel to appear more than a little odd to our modern sensibilities. For example, his visions, his psychic experiences, and his acted-out prophecies are not the kinds of things we encounter regularly today. But Ezekiel was more than just an odd character. He was also a prophet, priest, teacher, theologian, poet and organizer. And in each and every role, one thing is apparent: Ezekiel was man of towering faith. To this remarkable Prophet, only one thing mattered: the glory of God!

Ezekiel in Exile. Ezekiel lived and prophesied among the Jewish exiles in Babylon. He lived near the river (canal), Chebar, near Telabib. He was, in a sense, the prophet of the refugee camps during the period 597 to 538 B.C. While the Prophet Jeremiah remained in Judah to bear witness to the Lord in the midst of chaos and ruins, Ezekiel was sent into exile where he was called by God to prepare a tiny remnant of His people for the task that they would ultimately face. It was this little band that would one day return to the Holy Land and rebuild the nation.

As you read the assigned selections from the Book of Ezekiel, you might be puzzled by its apparent contradictory attitudes. For example, the first part – chapters 1 to 35 – is for the most part pessimistic, while the second part – chapters 36 to 48 – is joyously optimistic. The problem, however, resolves itself if you keep in mind that the exile forms the historical background for all of Ezekiel's prophecies.

The deportation to Babylon took place in several successive stages. As stated above, Ezekiel was among the first group of exiles who were mostly courtiers and skilled artisans, the elite of Jerusalem. They were taken as political hostages to ensure the loyalty of those permitted to remain in Judah. At first these exiles were fairly optimistic about their situation and the future of their nation because they assumed that once the Babylonians were convinced of Judah's continued loyalty, they would be sent home. Yes, the exile had been both inconvenient and uncomfortable, but it would soon be no more than a memory. In response to this optimistic wishful thinking, however, Ezekiel in effect tells the people: *If you think things are going to get better, prepare yourselves for a shock. You haven't seen anything yet. Things will get much worse. In fact, the Holy City, Jerusalem itself, shall be destroyed!*

Just a few years later, in 587 B.C., these prophetic words of Ezekiel were realized. They were no doubt remembered when news reached the Chebar in Babylon that a revolt in Judah had been crushed, King Zedekiah taken prisoner, and the Temple and the city destroyed. As the last band of tattered exiles reached Babylon, the entire Jewish community sank into the blackest despair.

Once more Ezekiel stepped forward, although this time in a different role. And throughout the long, dreary years of waiting, his words would be a ray of hope for this defeated nation. His watchword – “*God has not abandoned His people*” was a rallying cry to the exiles’ flagging spirits. One day there would be a new Israel, a new Jerusalem, a new Temple, and a New Covenant between God and man.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read:

Ez 1-3 – The Prophet’s Call

Ez 6-7 – The Exile

Ez 16 – The Allegory of the Faithless Wife

Ez 18 – Punishment and Pardon

Ez 24:15-27 – The Death of Ezekiel’s Wife

Ez 33-34 – Hope and Consolation

Ez 36:16-27:14 – The Restoration

Some of the most beautiful passages of Ezekiel can be found in chapters 25-32, particularly the following:

Ez 27; 28:1-19; 31:1-18

Major Sections of the Book of Ezekiel -- and when each was probably written.

1. *Ez 1-3 – Ezekiel’s Call.* This vivid description of Ezekiel’s vision and his call to prophecy was probably written shortly after it occurred.
2. *Ez 4-24 – Causes of the Exile.* Probably written sometime before the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C.
3. *Ez 25-32 – Against Judah’s Neighbors.* Probably written during the actual siege of Jerusalem.
4. *Ez 33-39 – Words of Hope.* Probably written after the fall of Jerusalem.
5. *Ez 40-48 – The New Jerusalem.* Probably written a few years later.

Some General Comments.

Ezekiel’s Situation. One thing we notice when reading Ezekiel is that it differs in many ways from other books of prophecy. Perhaps the greatest difference is that, throughout its 48 chapters, it consists entirely (with the possible exception of two verses, Ez 1:2-3) of one first-person account after another. As such it is a very personal book, likely written by the prophet himself. Because Ezekiel prophesied while in forced political exile in a foreign country, it would probably have been impossible for him to speak publicly to large gatherings as other prophets had. It seems that his own house became the place where he shared God’s messages with those who came to listen to him (for example, see Ez 33:30-33); and if these messages were to have a wider audience the prophet himself would have to preserve them in writing. Indeed, we are told that the vision and prophecies in chapters 1-24 were recorded by a scribe as Ezekiel spoke.

Ezekiel’s Vision and Call. Ezekiel’s vision (Ez 1-3) of the “*glory of the Lord*” (593 B.C.) is remarkable not only because of the prophet’s detailed description, but also because it took place in Babylon. The priests of Jerusalem believed that God’s glory, His divine radiance or essence, resided in the Temple in Jerusalem, but Ezekiel sees the Lord departing the Temple to appear before him in the skies over this foreign land 1,000 miles from Jerusalem. For someone like Ezekiel, rooted as he was in Jerusalem’s priestly traditions, the implications of this vision must have been truly shocking, especially since among God’s revelations to Ezekiel is the fact that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed in less than six years. To get a sense of the despair felt by Ezekiel’s fellow exiles after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586

B.C., read Psalm 137. This mood of despair was drastically different from how the exiles felt at the time of Ezekiel's vision. Can you think of other implications of the fact that this vision occurred in Babylon?

A Time of Confusion. The Jews of Ezekiel's time held several conflicting opinions about what would happen next. Many believed the defeats and humiliations they had suffered were only temporary. The exiles who held this opinion believed that they would soon be allowed to return to Judah. Others believed that the exiles had been singled out by God for judgment and punishment, and would therefore remain in captivity. Those in Jerusalem who held this opinion also believed that they could rightfully take the property left behind by the exiles. Lastly, there were those (e.g., the prophet Jeremiah) who vigorously claimed that Jerusalem would be destroyed. It was this last possibility that Ezekiel was called on to proclaim to his fellow exiles in Babylon. His purpose was not to change them (for it is emphasized that they are a rebellious people), but simply to ensure they know that a prophet of God has been in their midst, something that would become apparent when the events he predicts actually come to pass. Ezekiel, then, was a messenger through which God would clear up the confusion brought about by the exile.

Against the Nations. Chapter 25 consists of oracles against those nations that took advantage of Judah's fall and so caused her even more problems. From this don't assume Ezekiel is a prophet of vengeance. Far from it – for chapters 26 to 39, although quite varied, can all be brought under the essentially positive concept of building a remnant the Lord will restore, which harkens back to Isaiah's earlier hope.

The Vision of the Temple. In chapters 40 to 48 we have the amazing vision of the ideal Temple, committed to writing after some kind of mystical, ecstatic experience. Here Ezekiel contemplates the future of the theocratic city, in which the divine holiness will be the guiding and regulatory feature. Ezekiel's overall message is quite clear: God's holiness calls for the ultimate restoration of the nation since God's plan is so closely tied to Israel's destiny. But the restoration needed and offered is radical. Ezekiel pictures it as dry bones of the dead being clothed again with living flesh. This promise of resurrection was in itself an act of divine grace, meant to lead to repentance by at least a faithful minority among the exiles.

Ongoing Prophecies. In chapters 38 and 39, we encounter prophecies depicting the display of God's glory among the nations, along with another invasion from the north, but this time of such magnitude and with such a spectacular outcome that it will impact everyone. These prophecies have unleashed a train of speculation regarding their eventual fulfillment. Even today, many people look to chapters 38 and 39 as a literal picture of what will happen in the Middle East leading up to history's consummation. Instead of engaging in such speculations, however, it would be better for us to focus on the aspects of the prophet's message that will definitely affect the ultimate destiny of each of us. For example, the need for inner renewal and repentance so that God can work His will in our hearts and in our lives.

Some Key Passages. I suggest that you mark and pay particular attention to the following passages in your Bible:

- ***Ez 6:7*** – “*You shall know that I am the LORD.*” The prophet repeatedly points out the terrible punishments decreed against Judah have but one purpose: to proclaim to Israel and the nations the nature and plans of God, Lord of the whole earth.
- ***Ez 18:1-4*** – “*Only the one who sins shall die.*” Ezekiel is the first of the prophets to bring out fully that God is interested in the individual person. The ancient Israelites were so strongly aware of God's concern for the nation, that they were practically unaware of individual responsibility and direct personal relationship that exists between God and each person.
- ***Ez 24:15-17*** – “*the delight of your eyes...*” Some commentators think that the death of Ezekiel's wife, obviously greatly beloved by the prophet, so stunned him that he was unable to vent his grief in the usual wailing and lamentation. God forewarned Ezekiel of the personal tragedy that he might understand a significance beyond that of his personal loss. Others think that the whole event is metaphorical, a symbolic description of the grief of the exiles at the fall of Jerusalem.

(Personally, I lean toward the first explanation; that and the fact that Ezekiel was so highly favored that this foreknowledge was, in a sense, a special gift.)

- **Ez 33:1-33** – “*You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel.*” The fall of Jerusalem is the turning point in Ezekiel’s career. To mark this transition from prophet of doom to prophet of hope, his call and mission are restated.
- **Ez 34:16-31** – “*I will appoint one shepherd over them.*” This gentle pastoral view of the return from exile pictures the Redeemer not as an awe-inspiring conqueror, but rather as a humble shepherd. This is another step forward in the gradual understanding of the Messiah’s mission, a mission that will be defined explicitly by Jesus Himself.
- **Ez 36:25-32** – “*I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you.*” Israel’s destiny was to be a *holy* nation not a conquering one. The purpose of God’s judgments had been to display His holiness to the nations by cleansing His people, the Temple, their land. Filled with national pride, the Jews had looked forward to a “Day of the Lord,” but instead of a day of triumph, in the near term, it would be their day of condemnation. Yet the prophet pointed to another “Day of the Lord,” the final day when evil will suffer its ultimate defeat. In Christ the “Day of the Lord” was inaugurated and it will be completed only when all the kingdoms of the earth become His Kingdom and He becomes their King forever.

Unity of the Two Testaments.

- *The Glory of God.* Read Ezekiel 1:26-28 and then read Mk 9:2-7. Do you see the connection and similarities between these two passages? The glory of the Lord described in both is not something imagined. It is real. The reality comes across when those who experience the vision hear a voice instructing them about the present and preparing them for the future. Now read Acts 9:3-9 and compare it with the other two passages. Can you think of other, similar experiences described in Scripture? What do they all have in common? Finally, read Rev 22:3-5.
- *The Good Shepherd.* Christ’s words in which He describes Himself as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1-16) are a striking development of the shepherd theme found in Ez 34. Jesus is the “great shepherd” (Heb 13:20) who has come to “gather God’s flock” and sums up in Himself the entire pastoral ministry. It is in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, that God becomes the Good Shepherd of His people. Jesus is the good shepherd who teaches us, feeds us, and heals us. See Mk 6:34-44. And in Lk 15:1-7 we see the difference between Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and the other shepherds, those who are supposed to care for the people. Jesus seeks the lost and celebrates with rejoicing when He has found even one. He goes through unbelievable suffering and shame, even death on a cross, to save the lost and bring them back to the Father. Jesus lays down His life for His sheep, and He takes it up again in the Resurrection so that we too might rise from the dead and live with Him forever.
- *One Heart, a New Spirit (Ez 11:17-20; 36:25-28).* One heart, a new spirit, a heart of flesh to obey the commandments of the Lord. If there’s one thing that makes us ugly it’s the divisions we create among ourselves. When our hearts are filled with hatred and envy we go against God’s will that we be united in purpose and mind (1 Cor 1:10). To have gentle and forgiving hearts we need a “renewal of our minds” (Rom 12:2) and so God wants to give us a new spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that we can discern God’s will, but we first must ask for this power (Lk 11:13). The Holy Spirit is God’s love for us, a love that teaches us how to obey God’s will (Jn 14:15). Left to ourselves we would stray and so Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16-17,20).
- *Sin and Responsibility.* Ezekiel speaks about personal retribution for sin (Ez 18:2-32), but despite the people’s confusion about this, it had already been taught in the Torah. For example, Moses taught that, “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (Dt 24:16). Yet even after

such clear teaching, the people held onto their old belief that a person's ailments and difficulties stemmed from the sins of ancestors. Compare this to what Jesus teaches in Jn 9:1-5 and in Lk 13:1-5. Consider, too, Jesus' comments regarding repentance. And so, instead of pointing to others' sins as being responsible for our sufferings, we should look into our own hearts and see how we might have caused suffering for ourselves and others. And then without hesitation, let us approach God with repentance for our sinfulness.

- *The New Jerusalem.* The prominence which the actual city, Jerusalem, enjoyed in the Old Testament passes with the coming of the Messiah (Ez 40-48). Now it is the Church here on earth and the "heavenly Jerusalem" which will find realization at the end of time. (Rev 21:1-22:5)
- *The Covenant of Peace.* Throughout the New Testament we find references to the New Covenant between God and man inaugurated by Jesus Christ. Indeed the very name, the New Testament, that we give to the collection of Gospels, Letters and other books that make up the Church's sacred writings, is simply another way of saying *New Covenant*. It is called *new* for two reasons: (1) Jesus has fulfilled the Old Covenant and (2) through this New Covenant, sealed with the blood of the Savior, the Christian already shares in God's Kingdom where "all things will be made new" (Rev 20:5-7).

The Book of Ezekiel is also well represented in the Liturgy of the Word throughout the liturgical year. Indeed, passages from the book are included among the Old Testament readings in over 25 Sunday and weekday Masses. Additionally, Ezekiel's great vision of the new Jerusalem and the new Temple fittingly forms the biblical background of the liturgy used at the dedication of a new church.

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. The hidden meaning of contemporary events was explained to the Hebrews by the prophets. Is there any counterpart to the office of prophet in the Church today? What do you know about the prophet's office? Compare Ez 2-3 with Ez 6-7.
2. Have we become so aware of personal responsibility that we tend not to consider communal responsibility? How can one strike a balance? Compare Ez 3:16-21 and Ez 18.
3. Does the image of married love used by the prophet (Ez 24:15-27) tell us anything about love of country?
4. How did Ezekiel's understanding of his mission change when news arrived in Babylon of Jerusalem's fall?
5. What did the prophet mean when he told the people God would give them a "new heart and a new spirit"? (See Ez 36:25-32 and Ez 18:13-32)
6. What do you think of the following? "One must get rid of the pious imagery which so readily creates the belief that belonging to a flock is an invitation to bleat like a gentle lamb." (See Ez 33-34)
7. Read Ez 16 – the allegory of the faithless wife. How does it answer the following questions: Why does God punish? Why does God forgive? What is Israel's relationship to other nations?