

## EZEKIEL – SHORT VERSION

**Historical context.** Ezekiel was a prophet and priest. He prophesied in Babylon (called the “land of the Chaldeans”) from 598 to 571BC during the time when his people lived in exile. Ezekiel grew up in Jerusalem and departed for Babylon with the first group of exiles. In his introduction to the ministry of Ezekiel, Fr. John Power writes:

*The obliteration of the Davidic kingdom, and the reduction of the Israelites to slavery in a foreign land, presented them with the greatest single crisis in their history. And it was a specifically religious crisis. Yahweh was their God. The conquering Babylonians jeered that the gods of Babylon were obviously superior to the God of Israel. The fall of Jerusalem was interpreted, not merely as the defeat of a people, but as the defeat of that people’s God. The temptation to join with their masters in worshipping the imposing idols of Babylon was a pressing one. It was this crucial problem that confronted the young Ezekiel, when he received the prophetic call by the river Chebar. It is a measure of Ezekiel’s greatness, and of his right to be called a major prophet, that he was able to turn the exile from a period of dismal despair into years of reflection, repentance and hope.* (Set My Exiles Free, pp 142-143)

Ezekiel is considered one of the most colorful and perhaps strangest personalities in the Bible. His own people labeled him “one who is always spinning parables” (21:5). They recognized him as a man whose imagination was always on fire.

### Four dominant ideas in Ezekiel’s message

- **Omnipresence of God.** God is not bound to Judah, Jerusalem or the Temple. He is not some local deity whose powerful and protecting arm is too short to reach out to Babylonian towns and hamlets. This truth is underlined in Ezekiel’s opening vision. As the prophet sees it, the Lord’s chariot is mounted on wheels “*constructed as though one wheel were within another. They could move in any of the four directions they faced, without veering as they moved. ...Wherever the spirit wished to go, there the wheels went*” (Ez 1:16-17, 20).
- **Awesome majesty of God.** God is over-powering and awesome reaching beyond human

relationships (24:15-24) and human explanations (20:25). God is neither someone to be argued with, as in Jeremiah, nor someone agonizing over the fate of the people, as in Hosea. A phrase often used by Ezekiel to describe God’s majestic and overpowering presence is “the glory of God.”

- **Personal responsibility.** Whereas previous generations had stressed *corporate* responsibility (all were punished for the sins of the few) Ezekiel emphasizes *individual* responsibility. Each person is responsible for his living out the covenant. Each person lives or dies according to his/her virtuous or wicked life. This teaching is very important to the exiles. For if they are to be held responsible for the sins of their ancestors, what hope would there be for them? But if each is accountable for his/her own deeds, the future could be different.
- **New exodus.** A very important part of Ezekiel’s preaching is the promise that God will bring back the exiles to their homeland and religious roots. Ezekiel’s most impressive statement about the “new exodus” theme is found in his famous “dry bones” sermon (ch. 37).

**A prophet who acted out his sermons.** Ezekiel frequently delivers his message through actions—oftentimes, bizarre actions. For example:

- He lies on his side several times—symbolizing the siege of Jerusalem (4:1-8).
- He eats repulsive food—representing the famine that the besieged people will suffer (4:9-15).
- He cuts off his beard with a sword—signifying the exile of the people (5:1-4).
- He packs his bags and leaves the city through a hole in the wall—enacting the people’s exile from Jerusalem (12:3-5).
- Perhaps his most striking prophetic action is his decision *not* to mourn the death of his wife. In like manner, the citizens of Jerusalem are warned not to mourn the destruction of their beloved city, because it deserves the punishment in store for it. Thus, the prophet himself becomes the living manifestation of the message he proclaims.

What are we to think of so strange a prophet? In his book *The Men and Message of the Old Testament*, Fr. Peter Ellis writes:

*As we know from the history of the other prophets, God used prophets as they were, adapting their personalities to suit his purpose. At the beginning of the exile he needed a man who would make a strong and vivid impression on the minds of the doubting and discouraged exiles. Ezekiel fitted the role to perfection. Words are easily forgotten, but actions inspire curiosity, arouse discussion, and endure in the imagination along with their significance. What Ezekiel did was not easily forgotten. While only a few of the embittered exiles came to his home at first to consult and listen to him (8:1;14:1;20:1), he succeeded eventually in interesting the crowd by his eccentric behavior, and before long his words and actions were being discussed from house to house and in the streets and lanes (33:30-33).*

*When Jerusalem fell in 587 the full significance of Ezekiel's behavior became apparent to all, and his position as a true prophet was established. From that time on there was little pantomime, much serious preaching, and elaborate planning for Israel's prophetically assured return and restoration. (p.375)*

***A visionary and apocalyptic writer.*** When we read Ezekiel, we enter a strange world of many visions, some of which seem a bit bizarre. Over and over, Ezekiel describes being taken by God's Spirit to the heavenly realm where he witnesses incredible sights. Angelic beings (called cherubim), spinning wheels, symbolic creatures, and various visions of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem occupy the pages of this prophet. He is the "sentinel" of God (3:17; 33:1-9) who is to deliver God's warning to Jerusalem because of the people's sinfulness (4:1-17; 33:21). Ezekiel is given various images of destruction, such as the sword that cuts like a barber's razor (5:1) and the vine thrown into the fire (15:1-8). Yet there are also marvelous images of hope. The purpose of God's destructive actions against the people of Judah is not to annihilate them but to ensure their return to the Lord (33:10-11).

Ezekiel is the first biblical author to use *apocalyptic literature* to communicate his message. This type of literature uses symbols and bizarre figures of imagination to reveal God's unfolding plan for the world.

**Division of chapters.** As we read this book, we should be aware that Ezekiel's ministry is divided into two separate periods: *before* and *after* the final fall of Jerusalem. In the first period, Ezekiel warns the first exiles about their optimism. Many believe no harm can happen to Jerusalem and the Temple but Ezekiel tells them that such optimism is folly. Because the people fail to listen to God speaking through the prophets, Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed.

Once the news arrives that Jerusalem and the Temple are in ashes, and streams of new exiles start to come to Babylon, the exiles are plunged into unbelievable disillusionment. All hope of a future is lost. God has abandoned them. So in the second half of his ministry, Ezekiel's task is to restore hope to the people to save them from despair. Ezekiel the 'corrector' becomes Ezekiel the 'comforter.' His message shifts to one of hope.

### **Breakdown of the 48 chapters of the book**

**Part 1:** Call of the prophet (Chapters 1-3)

**Part 2:** Oracles against Jerusalem. She will be destroyed because of her sins. (Chapters 4-24)

**Part 3:** Oracles against the surrounding nations (Chapters 25-32)

**Part 4:** Words of comfort and hope of salvation for Israel (Chapters 33-39)

**Part 5:** The New Israel. The final chapters describe in great detail the new Temple and the new community that God will create once the exile is over. (Chapters 40-48)

### **Suggested texts to read**

**2:1-3:27:** The commissioning of Ezekiel as a prophet to the exiles, eating the scroll, the prophet as a watchman.

**16:1-63:** The prophet speaks of Israel as an adulterous spouse.

**18:1-30- Personal responsibility:** Each generation and individual is responsible of its own sins.

**33:10-20 – Individual responsibility**

**37:1-14 – The vision of the dry bones.**

### **Chapters 40-48**

The word of God comes to Ezekiel concerning the boundaries and internal division of Israel's restored land. When the people enter Palestine for the first time, each tribe is allocated land. Now the prophet sees a new return from exile and a new division of territory amongst the chosen people.

### **Concluding word**

In his book *Salvation History—A Biblical Theology*, Fr. Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., writes:

*“Ezekiel’s preaching was a success. His was the voice which the people heard in the dark days when they had almost given up all hope. He might be called the Joseph of the Babylonian captivity, for he it was who, in the providence of God, had been exiled in advance of his fellow countrymen to preserve the remnant of Judah in its faith and trust. He would not live to see the exodus from Babylon, just as Joseph did not witness the return from Egypt. Yet the work of each was necessary for the two returns.”(p.117)*