

# Ezekiel – Prophet of the Exile

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## Introduction

Four Old Testament prophets are called “major prophets,” or as some style them, “the four greater prophets:”<sup>1</sup> Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. The lives of the last three overlap each other somewhat, but the work of all four concerns the Babylonian exile of the Jews to some extent. Isaiah prophesied captivity in Babylon to Judah over a century before it began (Isa. 39:5–7). Jeremiah sounded the warnings of certain doom upon Judah if she did not repent, specifically prophesying that she would be held captive 70 years (Jer. 25:4–11). Daniel was God’s prophet to the courts of the Babylonians and then the Persians, the nations which held the Jews in captivity. Ezekiel was God’s prophet to these exiled, displaced Jews.

## Ezekiel, the Man

As the tender hearted Jeremiah wept out his impassioned pleas to the citizens of Jerusalem to “repent or perish” during the last quarter of the seventh century B.C., it seemed that all were saying, “We will not hearken” (Jer. 6:17).<sup>2</sup> However, there was one young man, the son of a priest named Buzi, who must have listened intently to and must have been considerably impressed with the message of the weeping prophet.<sup>3</sup> The young man’s name was Ezekiel (“God strengthens” ),<sup>4</sup> who followed his father into the priesthood (Eze. 1:3).

Of the three contingencies of Jews that were exiled to Babylon, Ezekiel was in that group of “Jehoiachin’s captivity” (Eze. 1:2). Daniel was in the first group to be moved (with the evil king Jehoiakim) to the strange land at the eastern extremity of the fertile crescent after Nebuchadnezzar’s first successful siege of Jerusalem in 606 B.C. (Dan. 1:1–7). The second human mass numbering 10,000 (including Ezekiel), made the long trek in about 598 B.C. (2 Kin. 24:14). These weary, heartbroken travelers settled in Chaldea near the city of Babylon by the river Chebar at Telabib (Eze. 1:3; 3:15). The prophet was apparently 30 years old when he began his prophetic work (Eze. 1:1). Since he received his prophetic call in the fifth year of his captivity (v. 2), he must have been 25 years old when he was forced to leave Jerusalem. His prophetic work continued at least to the 27th year of the captivity (Eze. 29:17), or approximately from 593 to 571 B.C.<sup>5</sup>

Little more personal information exists concerning Ezekiel. Unlike Jeremiah and Daniel, who apparently remained unmarried, Ezekiel married. His wife, whom he cherished, was taken

from him by a stroke in the fourth year of his prophetic work (Eze. 14:1, 15:18). He was acquainted with his fellow prophet, Daniel, who served in the king's court (Eze. 14:14, 20; 28:13). How far beyond the age of 52 years he lived or how he died we are not told.

### **Historical Setting of Ezekiel's Work**

Isaiah is best remembered for his prophetic emphasis on the Messiah, our Lord Christ. However, part of his message directly related to the experience of Ezekiel. Isaiah's prophetic work spanned the reigns of four kings of Judah, beginning during that of Uzziah in the middle of the eighth century B.C. and concluding in the time of Hezekiah, near the century's end (Isa. 1:1). Immediately before the time of Isaiah was a period of moral and religious corruption in Judah with only a few attempts at reform by any of the kings. For the first several years of Isaiah's work the abominations of idolatry prevailed. While Hosea, Joel, and Amos called for repentance in Israel, Isaiah preached the same message in Judah.

Finally, the righteous Hezekiah ascended the throne of Judah and earnestly strove to drive idolatry out of his kingdom. In the sixth year of his reign (722 B.C.) Israel, unresponsive to God's prophets, was given over to Sargon and taken into Assyrian captivity. Despite Hezekiah's heroic efforts in Judah, assisted by Isaiah, the intoxicant of idolatry would prove too addictive to be permanently cured apart from the destruction of the kingdom itself. When, in an outbreak of pride, Hezekiah revealed all of the treasures and secrets of his kingdom to the son of the king of Babylon, Isaiah informed his monarch that the day would come when all of his treasures and his sons would be carried away to Babylon (Isa. 39:5-7). He spoke of those days that came in the experience of Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel 106 years before they began to occur.

Following righteous Hezekiah there was but one other serious reformer-king. Hezekiah's great-grandson, Josiah, who reigned from 640-609 B.C., had valiant help from Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Nahum. True religion was restored for a time under Josiah, but no sooner than his sons began to succeed him do we read one after another that they "did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." (2 Kin. 23:32, 37; 24:9, 20). The measure of God's wrath was finally filled up and He used Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in first one (606 B.C.), then another (598 B.C.), and finally, the conclusive attack upon Jerusalem (586 B.C.), resulting in the destruction of the nation of Judah, as well as the city itself. Ezekiel lived in these times of terrible duress, preaching the message God revealed to him both before and after the destruction of his beloved home city.

## **Immediate Setting of Ezekiel's Prophecy**

The topographical setting of all of Ezekiel's prophetic work was in Chaldea at Telabib. However, the developments taking place in Judea provided the several themes for his prophetic message. Ezekiel's message centered around the fall of Jerusalem. The book of 48 chapters evenly self-divides into prophecies delivered prior to 586 B.C. (1-24) and those delivered subsequent to Jerusalem's destruction (25-48). It is also observable that generally the prophecies delivered before the city fell are messages of denunciation of the sins of Judah, while those delivered after the fall of the city are such as would raise hopes and bring promises to God's down-trodden people. We will do well to examine why this pattern of prophecy occurred.

Those pitiable souls Ezekiel addressed (with both tongue and pen) consisted of at least five separate groups who had been exiled. The earliest groups of Jews to arrive in that general area were those displaced from Israel. First, there were those removed there by Tiglath-pileser, King of Assyria, in about 734 B.C. (2 Kin. 15:29). Twelve years later, through the efforts of Shalmaneser, Samaria was sacked, and the remainder of Israel was carried away to Assyria in the reign of Sargon (2 Kin. 17:5-6; Isa. 20:1).<sup>6</sup> As earlier noticed, the first specific Scriptural record of groups from Judah to be exiled to Babylon made their mournful journey eastward in 606 and 598 B.C., respectively.<sup>7</sup> The first five or six years of Ezekiel's work were probably felt among all those displaced Jews to some degree, but particularly among those from Judah. After Jerusalem fell, all who remained following the siege, except the "poor of the land," made up the third sad procession to Babylon (2 Kin. 25:8-12).<sup>8</sup> Some of these also surely came under the sound of Ezekiel's voice in the last several years of his preaching.

The two major divisions of Ezekiel's prophetic message represent different needs in his hearers. They also represent different purposes in God's plan for these people. First, consider the needs of these people before Jerusalem fell. They needed to be made aware of exactly why these tragedies had befallen them. God wanted to be sure that His people were not allowed to assume that they were merely the unfortunate victims of purposeless historical events. Consequently, we read the following denunciation of the sins of the Israelites:

Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the midst of the nations, and countries are round about her. And she hath rebelled against mine ordinances in doing wickedness more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries that are round about her; for they have rejected mine ordinances, and as for my statutes, they have not walked in them...; therefore thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Behold, I, even I, am against thee; and I will execute judgments in the midst of thee in the sight of the nations. And I will

do in thee that which I have not done, and whereunto I will not do any more the like, because of all thine abominations. Therefore, the fathers shall eat the sons in the midst of thee, and the sons shall eat their fathers; and I will execute judgments on thee; and the whole remnant of thee will I scatter unto all the winds (Eze. 5:5-10).

Similar outcries by the prophet occur frequently in the first half of his book. They are designed to both show these stony-hearted Jews the heinousness of their abominations to God and that God is the source of their calamities because of their evils: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Eze. 18:4). A second great need of these people was to have their hearts turned from idols back to the true and living God. A pattern emerges in Ezekiel's message as the prophet reviews the sins of his people, connects their sufferings with God's retribution, and then concludes by saying: "And they shall know that I am Jehovah" (6:7). This expression occurs some 58 times in the book. In their total apostasy into idolatry, they had rationalized: "Jehovah seeth us not; Jehovah hath forsaken the land" (8:12). Ezekiel's continual reminder from God to them ("and they shall know that I am Jehovah") was intended to correct their disastrous rationalization.

God had seen all their wickedness, and it was no longer tolerable. Time after time Ezekiel raises the impassioned denunciation of God against their idolatry (Eze. 8:1-17; 14:6; 16:30-34; 22:3-4, et al.). The combination of God's chastisement and Ezekiel's prophetic outcries turned the Jews from their idolatry. Robert Taylor's assessment of this effect of Ezekiel's prophecy is well stated:

The book of Ezekiel shows the utter folly of idols. The Son of man showed Israel what idolatry had cost them. The long and sad exile permanently cured Israel of idol worship. That was one of the profitable fruits that accrued from the captivity period.<sup>9</sup>

A third great need of these people was the correction of their false hopes. False prophets in Jerusalem (especially Hananiah) were predicting a swift change in the fortunes of Jerusalem. He announced that within two years the yoke of Babylon would be broken, and all the holy vessels and the captives taken away to Babylon would be returned (Jer. 28:1-4). There were likewise such false prophets among the exiles, raising unfounded hopes of a speedy return by predicting peace when there was no peace (Jer. 29:8-9; Eze. 13:8-19). Instead of planning to return to Jerusalem soon, Jeremiah counseled them to prepare for a long stay in Chaldea by building houses, planting gardens, and rearing families, for not until after 70 years would they return (Jer. 29:4-7, 10). Ezekiel exposed the false hopes of his people by telling of the coming siege against Jerusalem (4:1-8; 24:1-14), describing the awful miseries the remaining inhabitants

of Jerusalem would endure (4:9–17; 5:1–12, et al.), relating Jehovah’s abandonment of the temple (10:18–19), and by predicting the coming exile of Zedekiah and his subjects who would survive the fall of Jerusalem (12:1–13).

Related to the false hope of soon returning home was the widespread idea that Jerusalem was impregnable. In spite of the almost universal apostasy into idolatry of the Jews of the seventh and sixth centuries before Christ, there was apparently yet some sort of superstitious mistaken carry-over from the faith of their fathers that God would defend Jerusalem no matter what. Thus the false prophets were insisting that the “walls” (Judah?) would be patched up and the “foundation” (Jerusalem?) would stand firm (Eze. 13:10–16). G. Currey has a good description of this attitude, both in Jerusalem and among the exiles:

The seeds of the idolatry with which Manasseh had saturated the land, and which Josiah had in vain attempted thoroughly to root up yet remained in Jerusalem. Even among the priests and in the temple the abominable worship of false gods was carried on, though in secret (8:5f). To the exiles, too, the hankering after idolatry in some degree clung (14:3f), though probably in a less decided degree. Mixed up with this unfaithfulness to the true God there was yet prevalent a carnal and superstitious confidence in His disposition to protect the city and people, once His own. Looking to nothing beyond outward and material things, they deemed that Jehovah was, as it were, pledged to uphold His people; and utterly disregarding the conditional character of His promises, and the more spiritual nature of His blessings, they satisfied themselves that the once glorious Jerusalem never would and never could be overthrown. False prophets were ever at hand to support these delusions (13:2f), to which the exiles, as well as those yet unremoved, clung with a desperate pertinacity, even at the very moment that Jerusalem was tottering to its fall.<sup>10</sup>

In answer, Ezekiel declared that the “mortar” which the false prophets were counting on was “untempered,” and the storm of God’s wrath would demolish not only the wall, but the foundation as well (13:10–14). Time after time he used figures and objects of various kinds to prepare the exiles for the news of the catastrophic destruction of their city.

The exiles had all their hopes and dreams blasted for an early return home by the news that Jerusalem had fallen (14:25–27; 33:21–22). While the captives keenly felt sorrow and bitterness throughout the captivity, they had these emotions intensified to the point of despair by news that their beautiful and beloved Jerusalem had fallen and was sacked, leveled, and burned—reduced to a heap of rubble! It is not known precisely at what time in the captivity the moving “Exile Psalm” (Psa. 137) was written, but it is quite believable that it may have been a response to the news that Jerusalem had been utterly demolished. Only those incapable of being moved emotionally in any way can remain untouched by its tender pathos. It reads, in part:

By the rivers of Babylon,  
There we sat down, yea, we wept,  
When we remembered Zion.

Upon the willows in the midst thereof  
We hanged up our harps.

For there they that led us captive required  
of us songs,  
And they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying,  
Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing Jehovah's song  
In a foreign land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,  
Let my right hand forget her skill.

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
If I remember thee not;  
If I prefer not Jerusalem  
Above my chief joy.

The overwhelming need of the captives after the destruction of Jerusalem was some word of comfort and hope. The latter half of Ezekiel's prophecy was just such a message. Even the "interlude" chapters (25–32), which pronounced doom on various nations that were historic enemies of the Jewish state, are a part of this message of hope. These prophecies of national judgments indicated that God would not allow the tormentors of His people to continue indefinitely in their cruel courses.

The real message of hope, however, is the promise of return to their homeland. Ezekiel mentioned this even before Jerusalem fell (11:17), but the burden of his preaching after the fall was the restoration and revival of Israel. This encouragement was accomplished not only through explicit promises (28:25; 34:11f; 37:21, et al.), but through the dramatic vision of the resurrected dry bones (37:1–14).

A significant facet of the promise of the return from captivity was that it included the weary exiles of both Israel and Judah. God's commission to Ezekiel included his being sent "...to the children of Israel, to **nations** that are rebellious..." (2:3, *emph. DM*). To whom could *nations* refer but both Judah and Israel under the revived name of the original, united kingdom — *Israel*, thus embracing all the remnant of Jacob's descendants?

Relevant to this reunion theme in Ezekiel's message is the fact that he mentions *Judah* only 15 times, while he addresses or refers to *Israel* some 177 times. Surely, we are not to conclude that this displaced prophet of Judah is primarily addressing the remnant of the former 10-tribe nation of Israel in the exile by his constant reference to *Israel*. Rather, we are to understand the prophet's use of *Israel* to be directed toward the strangers and pilgrims of both Jacobite nations. Indeed, he graphically enforced his explicit prophecy of the reunification of the formerly separate states by his taking two sticks and placing them together in one hand (37:15-22).

Currey commented appropriately as follows:

One of the immediate effects of the captivity was the reunion of the severed tribes of Israel. For although the place of Ezekiel's abode may not have been identical with that of the exiles of the ten tribes, still the exile of the Jews brought them into contact with their brethren of the earlier exile. The political reasons which had sundered them were at an end; a common lot begat sympathy in the sufferers....

In the course of the years which had elapsed since their exile, the numbers of the ten tribes may well have wasted away. As their separate constitution in their own land had been founded on idolatry, though in a modified form, they would be more apt than the men of Judah, the professing servants of the true Jehovah and His temple, to be absorbed among the heathen who surrounded them, and thus the exiles from Judah may have far exceeded in number and importance those who yet remained of the exiles of Israel.... All descendants of Abraham were again being drawn together as one people, and this was to be effected by the separated members gathering again around the legitimate centre of government and of worship, under the supremacy of Judah.... The amalgamation of the exiles of Israel and of Judah is in fact distinctly predicted by Jeremiah (Jer. 3:18); a prediction which has been indeed referred by some to a reunion yet to come, but which had in fact its accomplishment in the restoration of the people to their native land by the decree of Cyrus.

Attempts have been made from time to time to discover the lost ten tribes, by persons expecting to find, or thinking that they have found them existing still as a separate community. But according to the foregoing view we need not look forward to any such discovery. The time of captivity was the time of reunion. Ezekiel's mission was to the house of Israel, not only to those who came out with him from Jerusalem or Judah, but to those also of the stock whom he found residing in a foreign land, where they had been settled for more than 100 years (37:16; 48:1).<sup>11</sup>

Ezekiel's magnificent symbolism concerning the revived kingdom, temple, priesthood, and worship under a new "King David" further kindled the hope of Israel (34:23-24; 37:24; 44:3). These renewed entities as fully described in chapters 40-48 are prophecies of the Christ and his church. While they would not themselves live to see those things, Jacob's stock must be returned to their land for those latter day promises to be fulfilled by later generations. Charles Pledge has a good summary statement on this closing section of the prophecy:

Chapters 40–48 must be understood as prophecies of the Messianic age. These blessings portrayed here in highly figurative language are to be understood as referring to those blessings which Paul refers to (1 Cor. 2:7–10). These blessings represent the glorious riches of the grace of God given to Christians described in Ephesians chapters 1–3. To try to force a literal interpretation upon these chapters as referring either to the restoration of Israel to their land following the Babylonian captivity, or to a future millennium, is to misapply and misinterpret these passages. Such cannot be done consistently, and if not consistently, not truthfully.

Keep in mind that these prophecies are primarily to encourage the people in captivity to hope. They can look forward in hope to the glorious and majestic scenes as described here, even though they themselves will never participate directly in these blessings. However, knowing that these blessings shall be bestowed by their God assures them that God must keep his word to them in order to fulfill these promises. Therefore, this highly figurative description of the temple and the services of it is merely a vision of the church of our Lord upon earth in this age. Chapters 40–48 represent a time when the true worship of the Lord will be upon this earth—an elaborate representation of this Messianic age in which the Lord dwells in the midst of his people.<sup>12</sup>

In Ezekiel’s message we see the justice of God satisfied as he poured out His wrath upon a rebellious and unbelieving people. We also see the faithfulness and mercy of God demonstrated in His preserving a remnant of his people through whom He could eventually bring the promised seed of Abraham into the world. Ezekiel was a faithful prophet, delivering this two-fold message to God’s people.

### **Practical Principles from Ezekiel and His Message**

#### ***Practical Principles from the Man:***

Ezekiel worked under the most discouraging and trying circumstances imaginable. He was an exile among an exiled people. While those all about him entertained hopes of a quick restoration to their homeland, God instructed him that such would not be the case. Moreover, God gave him the unenviable task of deflating the little bit of unfounded optimism the Jews could muster. It was his sad duty to tell these people that even Jerusalem would fall. To make matters even more sorrowful and discouraging for the prophet, his wife, “the desire of his eyes,” died. In spite of all these things, he faithfully executed the commission Jehovah gave him. So far as we know, he never asked, “Why me, Lord?” He had in common with every other faithful, stalwart prophet and preacher that has ever lived, the ability to press on in the face of discouragements and trials that would have wrecked lesser men.

How we all need to learn the lesson of perseverance and steadfastness in the Lord’s work, and there are few better places to learn it than from the life of Ezekiel. It is not ours to



choose to be faithful only when circumstances are comfortable and convenient or only when we are among those who encourage us in righteousness. We must preach the word urgently, whether “in season” or “out of season” (2 Tim. 4 :2). Ezekiel was one man alone among the hostile voices of the deportees, charged by God to speak a most unpopular message. It has been a mark of compromising preachers (both inspired and uninspired) through the centuries to speak what men want to hear rather than what they need to hear – the popular message that makes auditors feel comfortable. Neither the pressure of the false prophets (who were falsely crying, “peace”), nor the clamor of the people for a pleasing message could deter the valiant Ezekiel. Let us learn from this worthy prophet the virtue of faithfulness under fire and of determination in the face of discouragement.

From Ezekiel we learn that we who preach are not responsible for the response of those who hear, but for the message delivered. God warned the prophet that he would be speaking to people who were rebellious, impudent, and stiff hearted (2:3–4). Even if they would not hear, Ezekiel was to so preach to them that they could know “...that there hath been a prophet among them” (2:5). The latter statement projects the degree of power to be found in preaching the Truth of God’s Word. God has sent his prophets and preachers through the centuries. Some have been received, but most have been rejected, including our Lord Jesus. However, when a man has faithfully declared God’s message, even the most hardened hearts who hear will know that they have had a preacher of God among them. Not all who preach are faithful to the task, however. When some pulpiteers get through, their hearers may know that they have had a politician, a psychologist, a philosopher, a social worker, an after–dinner speaker, a moralist, a story–teller, a book–reviewer, a back–slapping promoter, or something else among them – but not a Gospel preacher. It is our charge so to speak the Truth that when we have finished speaking, whether men reject it or accept it, they may know that they had heard a Gospel preacher. Thus did God commission Ezekiel, and thus he commissions those preach the Word in every age.

God commanded Ezekiel: “Son of man, all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thine heart and hear with thine ears” (3:10). Then he commanded the prophet to speak those very things to Israel, with the authoritative pronouncement: “Thus saith the Lord Jehovah” (v. 11). Ezekiel faithfully delivered God’s message – all of it. No man has the right to change the message, whether by addition, subtraction, or substitution. The curse of the world and of the church today is that innumerable preachers have gone throughout the earth, preaching either

less or more than all of God's Word, all the while claiming, "Thus saith the Lord Jehovah." This fact explains the thousands of diverse religious bodies all professing faith in the Lord and His Word. I must state sadly that not a few such preachers hold forth in the church of Christ, resulting in compromise and outright apostasy on a grand scale. It is bad enough that men are not content to preach the whole Truth, but one's condemnation will surely be intensified who claims the authority of Jehovah for his mutilated message. Ezekiel, like Paul six centuries later, "...shrank not from declaring the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). So must our practice be.

Ezekiel was faithful in the task of being a watchman in Israel. This charge was so important that God gave it twice to his prophet (3:17-21; 33:7-9). The watchman for a city stood in a tower or on a wall and warned of approaching danger. Ezekiel was to sound the spiritual warning to the wicked to turn from their evils lest they die in them. If they would not hear, the prophet would be spared because he had warned them. However, if they were lost without warning, both prophet and sinner would perish. It mattered not that those who were evil did not want or heed the warning, the dedicated prophet must deliver it anyway. This is reminiscent of the popular accusation of God's faithful preachers that arose several years ago: "We are answering questions people are not asking." Are we to suppose that the exiled Jews were asking for warnings from Ezekiel about false prophets and hireling shepherds or about repenting of their sins? Hardly.

Ezekiel was bound by God to deliver to them what they needed, rather than what they wanted to hear—to warn them that they must repent or perish. Men still don't like to be warned of spiritual dangers. How often we hear today: "Don't tell us about the problems," "Don't expose false doctrine," "Just preach the Gospel and leave other folks alone," "You're too negative," and such like. One preacher wrote in a bulletin that crossed my desk that he had cancelled his subscriptions to several papers which dealt mainly with "brotherhood issues." He admitted having too many more important things to do than to keep abreast of such matters himself. He is doubtless serving as a great watchman where he preaches—warning brethren of the encroachments of worldliness and error!

Why are so many of our congregations floundering doctrinally? The watchmen began failing to warn a few years ago. Some over-wise analysts among the brethren convinced a sizeable number of preachers in the 1960s that they had been too harsh, unkind, plainspoken, and dogmatic. A number of preachers followed these pied-piper, self-appointed analysts into the fad of a *positive only* approach that did not at first contain blatant error, but that failed to do

any warning against or exposure of error. “Negative preaching” became an abomination to many. Those congregations that slipped and those that are slipping ever-nearer the precipice of denominationalism presently are in many cases the same ones who have had no watchmen to warn them of the Crossroads Movement, instrumental music in worship, premillennialism, *marriage, divorce, and remarriage* errors, *grace only–no law* doctrines, *Holy Spirit* errors, and many others. The congregations that drift into such errors will not be held guiltless, but what of the multiplied guilt of those preachers and elders – God’s watchmen – who were silent before the approaching enemy? Let us learn from Ezekiel that we are neither faithful to God nor do we love His people if we do not warn them of lurking dangers. Whether or not they desire the warnings is immaterial. Even if none of them hear, we must warn them or have their blood on our own hands.

***Practical Principles from the Message:***

God’s promises are conditional. The exiled Jews labored under the false hope that Jerusalem would be spared because of God’s promises. Ezekiel exposed their delusion time after time, telling them that the city would be destroyed because Israel had grievously sinned and would not repent. They had forgotten the prophecy of Moses some nine centuries before that spelled out the conditional nature of God’s promises and exactly described their present sufferings (Deu. 4:25–31). Ezekiel therefore said those bitter words: “I will do unto them after their way, and according to their desserts will I judge them; and they shall know that I am Jehovah” (7:27b). God’s promises are still conditional. The doctrines of unconditional election, salvation, and grace only are totally foreign to the Bible from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21.

We learn God’s estimate of Noah, Daniel, and Job from Ezekiel’s book. When God chose three men to represent the very pinnacle of righteousness, He mentioned these three men (14:12–14; 19–20). Consider the diligence and obedience of Noah in building the ark in the midst of a people saturated with wickedness. Consider Daniel’s spotless life in pagan palaces and his courageous convictions which led him to the lions’ den. Consider Job who lost in one day almost everything but his faith in God. No wonder they stand so tall among the heroes in God’s “hall of fame”! If God prized these qualities in them, so does He in us.

Men are accountable for their sins: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Eze. 18:20). Men sin as though it were with impunity and no consequence, but not so. Just as Israel had to pay for her sins, so must all men one day “...be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it

be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). Retribution does not always come immediately, but it will come no less certainly for the impenitent perpetrator. The penalty for sin must be paid by man or by a substitute acceptable to God. We should never cease to praise God and His Son that "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (5:21).

Men are accountable for their sins alone: "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him" (Eze. 18:20). Never were there a more patently unscriptural and anti-scriptural doctrines than those of inherited sin on one hand and imputed righteousness on the other.

Ezekiel clearly teaches that the pre-Calvary Gentiles were accountable to God. No fewer than eight chapters of his book proclaim God's judgments upon them because of their evils (25-32). Some are now teaching that when Paul wrote of the Gentiles that "God gave them up" (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28), he meant that throughout the Mosaic dispensation God arbitrarily consigned them to Hell, completely ignoring them; they were under no law from God whatsoever. However, Ezekiel was not aware that God gave no notice to the nations as he pronounced God's notice of their sins and His judgments against them. Clearly, they were capable of sin and He condemned them for it. They therefore were certainly accountable to laws given by God, or they would have been guiltless, "...for where no law is, there is no transgression" (Rom. 4:15; 5:13; 7:8b). Thus it is impossible for men to sin in the absence of law. Indeed, the Gentile world remained under "Patriarchal Law" throughout the Mosaic period and those Gentiles who lived and during that period will be judged accordingly (Mat. 10:15; 11:22, 24).

God is a jealous God. The entire background of Ezekiel's work and Israel's grief was their generations of idolatry that had stirred the Lord to an awful jealousy. The opening stanza of the covenant of God through Moses to these people warned of his jealousy: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me...for I am a jealous God..." (Exo. 20:3-5). Repeatedly, Ezekiel rebuked their idolatries and explained that God could no longer tolerate them. He accused them of spiritual "harlotry" in going after the idols of the surrounding Amorites (Eze. 6:9). God is no more pleased with the worship of idols of wood or stone now than then. Neither will He ignore our worship of the subtler, but nonetheless real, idols of science, sex, money, real estate, and/or any other thing or person. Covetousness (i.e., materialism) constitutes idolatry (Col. 3:5). We

must seek the Lord and His kingdom and righteousness first, or we shall have Him not at all, except as a justly jealous judge (Mat. 6:33)!

Ezekiel's message exposes the vanity of the search for (and claims of finding) the "10 lost tribes of Israel." The entire book addresses recombined Israel and Judah, as previously noted. The remnant of the 10 tribes of Israel that were already in captivity when Judah arrived there, were reunited with the Judean exiles and together they returned as one people to the homeland, as Ezekiel clearly prophesied (37:15–23). The Mormons claim to have found the lost tribes in the American Indian nations. The Armstrongs (both Herbert W. and Garner Ted) claim that the Anglo-Saxon race is the old northern kingdom of Israel, and this is a keystone of their laughable doctrine. If men read nothing more than Ezekiel on the fate of the 10 tribes they would know that whatever happened to any of the Jews after the captivity happened to all of them, for they returned to their homeland as one people, except for those who elected to stay in the land of captivity. There are no "lost tribes of Israel."

### Conclusion

The diligent and perceptive student of Ezekiel will find additional practical considerations as his or her reward.<sup>13</sup> His book needs to be "dusted off" by every Christian, but especially by every Gospel preacher. The man, Ezekiel, is a tower of spiritual strength, and his message is one that declares many pertinent principles of truth for all who would understand Jehovah God and how to please him.

### Endnotes

1. John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969), v. 3, p. 429.
2. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
3. *Pulpit Commentary* has an interesting chart comparing several passages in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. While not implying any dependence by Ezekiel upon Jeremiah for his prophetic message (it all came by "visions of God" [Eze. 1:1]), the several striking likenesses do imply Ezekiel's familiarity with Jeremiah. See *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D. M. Spence, Joseph G. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), v. 12, p. xxv.
4. Wilhelm Moller, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1955), v. 2, p. 1071.
5. For an informative discussion of the chronology of Ezekiel, see Moller, pp. 1071–72.
6. For clarification of the history and succession of the Assyrian kings of the 8th century B.C., see article on "Sargon," *McClintock and Strong*, v. 9, pp. 357–58.

7. According to Assyrian inscriptions, Sennacherib of Assyria deported 200,150 residents from the 46 towns of Judah he captured (c. 702 B.C.). The Bible reports the capture of fortified cities in Judah by the Assyrian king, but makes no mention of exiles (2 Kin. 18:13). See article on "Assyria" by George W. Gilmore, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel MCCAULEY JACKSON (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), v. 1, pp. 331-32. For an excellent summation of the various series of deportations, both from Israel and Judah, see William Hendriksen, *Bible Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), p. 117.
8. Some scholars believe a fourth Judean displacement is referred to in Jeremiah 52:30 (see Hendriksen, p. 117). However, Adam Clarke's explanation of Jeremiah 52:28-30 as a description of some minor deportations not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture is quite satisfactory to this writer (see *Clarke's Commentary* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1924], v. 4, p. 395).
9. Robert R. Taylor, Jr., *The Living Messages of the Books of the Old Testament*, ed. Garland Elkins, Thomas B. Warren (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press, 1977), p. 296.
10. G. Currey, *The Bible Commentary*, ed. F.C. Cook (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), v. 6, p. 3.
11. Currey, p. 5.
12. Charles A. Pledge, *Getting Acquainted With the Old Testament* (Memphis, TN: Pledge Pub., 1971), v. 2, p. 195.
13. For a highly recommended discussion of these matters see Robert R. Taylor, Jr., pp. 293-05.

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