

Ezekiel's Sign

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 1:2–6

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 1:1–3; 2:1–3:27; 8:1–4;
11:22–25; 24:15–24; 33:30–33

Today's Scripture: Ezekiel 3:10–11; 24:15–24, 27

I. Two Imperatives

Ezekiel 3:10–11

¹⁰ And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. ¹¹ 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.”

10a. This verse and the next offer us just a small part of Ezekiel's commissioning to be a prophet of God. That lengthy commissioning is described in all of chapters 2 and 3! The idea is that the man Ezekiel must be prepared for his new role.

10b. In Ezekiel 2:8–3:3, the prophet-in-training was commanded to eat a message “contained on a scroll” and to fill his “belly” and “stomach” with its words. When we place that command alongside the instruction here for Ezekiel to *take to heart* what he hears that God has to say, the picture is one of complete and total acceptance of the Lord's message.

11. To this point in the book, the Lord has spoken of the audience Ezekiel will be addressing as “obstinate,” “stubborn,” and “hardened” (Ezekiel 2:4; 3:7). As such, they are “briers,” “thorns,” and “scorpions” (2:6). Ezekiel won't have to travel far to address them because he lives right among them *in exile*.

In sharing in the fate of the people, it will be natural for Ezekiel to speak with compassion. But Ezekiel's compassion must not be allowed to soften the Lord's message. *Whether they listen or fail to listen* is irrelevant in that regard (compare Ezekiel 2:5, 7). The prophet's duty is to remain faithful to the Lord's message. His listeners must decide for themselves whether they will do the same.

II. Unusual Reaction

Ezekiel 24:15–18

¹⁵ The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ “Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. ¹⁷ Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners.”

¹⁸ So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

15–16a. The prophet has obeyed God without fail in communicating *the word of the Lord* to the people. Much of this communication has involved him using himself in and as illustrations of God's

wrath to come against the covenant people. Another illustration is coming: the loss of *the delight* of the prophet's eyes, the death of Ezekiel's wife.

16b–17. In a series of nine commands, God directs that Ezekiel's outward, visible and audible reaction to his loss is to be strictly countercultural.

The phrases *keep . . . your sandals on your feet; do not cover your mustache and beard* indicate a shared expectation regarding proper “mourning attire.” The phrase *eat the customary food of mourners* points to food that is eaten at funeral meals.

There is a certain overlap in the meanings of these nine prohibitions, and it's tempting to examine each of the nine in minute detail. It's more valuable, however, to focus on the bigger picture: the larger task of prophetic communication must take precedence over all else.

18. Ezekiel obeys God—period. Even so, we can't help but notice that the text is striking for what it does not say and the obvious questions it does not answer. The timeline of *in the morning, and in the evening* and *the next morning* indicates a period of many hours between Ezekiel's receiving God's instruction, the death of the prophet's wife, and the man's divinely commanded visible non-reaction to it.

III. Sobering Prophecy Ezekiel 24:19–24, 27

¹⁹ Then the people asked me, “Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us? Why are you acting like this?”

²⁰ So I said to them, “The word of the LORD came to me: ²¹ Say to the people of Israel, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary—the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword. ²² And you will

do as I have done. You will not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners. ²³ You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves. ²⁴ Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.’”

²⁷ “At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the LORD.”

19. *The people* notice Ezekiel's odd behavior. He exhibits none of the typical actions, emotions, or postures of grief. Interested curiosity is a good first step toward understanding something. But as we move from curiosity to investigation to understanding, we must be aware of what we use as a “filter” in reaching conclusions. Another way to say this is that we must acknowledge our presuppositions. Then we must be prepared to change them as the evidence requires.

20. The author's frequent use of the words *I* and *me* leaves no doubt that Ezekiel himself was writing of his personal experiences regarding his interactions with God. As the prophet passes along divine communication, he is fulfilling his role as a watchman (Ezekiel 3:16–27; 33:1–20). The phrase *the word of the Lord* makes clear that what the prophet is about to say does not originate with himself.

21a. People are more open to learning something new if they themselves open the discussion. That seems to be the technique here as Ezekiel has waited for the people to ask, “Why?” before he gives the answer that begins in this verse.

The response *the people of Israel* invites a review of the terminology used to identify God's covenant people of the Old Testament era. Shortly after the death of King Solomon in 930 BC, the united kingdom of Israel's 12 tribes divided into two kingdoms. After that happened, the word *Israel* often became associated with only the 10 northernmost tribes. Even so, that distinction had also been used before the monarchy divided. Concurrently, the designation *Judah* often was shorthand for the 2 southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The tribe of Benjamin was much smaller than that of Judah.

But that distinction in sense and reference was not always airtight after the monarchy divided. In the text before us, for example, the word *Israel* does not seem to include the 10 northern tribes since the audience is those of Judah (and Benjamin) who were in Babylonian exile; the 10 northernmost tribes had been taken into Assyrian exile over 130 years prior. That conclusion harmonizes with the way the writer refers to Israelites in Ezekiel 2:3; 3:7; 6:5; etc.

21b. This is the answer to the "Why?" question of Ezekiel 24:19, above. The prophet's audience is expected to see that his reaction (or, more precisely, his lack of reaction) to the death of his wife as an analogy:

- I. Loss of Ezekiel's wife = loss of temple (*the desire of your eyes*);
- II. Ezekiel = the people;
- III. Ezekiel's reaction = people's reaction to the destruction and death.

As the Assyrians were God's tool to exile Israel's 10 northern tribes in 722 BC, so also the Babylonians would be to the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC. The temple is not some kind of good-luck charm that protects evil people.

Although Ezekiel's audience in Baby-

lon would not personally experience the destruction to be wrought by Nebuchadnezzar, they would share in the horror of that event nonetheless. This would be the punishment for their sin of idolatry.

22–23. The prophet now drives home the analogy. No one can miss the "this will be like that" connections between his reactions (and lack of reactions) to his wife's death and those that will characterize the people when they hear of Jerusalem's fall. As Ezekiel speaks, it is January 15, 588 BC; Jerusalem would fall on July 18, 586 BC. Thus Jerusalem has only a bit longer than two and a half years before it will be destroyed.

We may wonder how a city could survive a siege that lasts more than 30 months. The answer is found in Jeremiah 37:11—the siege was lifted temporarily while the Babylonian army dealt with a threat regarding Pharaoh's army.

24. False prophets and their false prophecies are rampant in this era. Their messages contradict those of the true prophets of God. So, how are the people to know who is a true prophet and who is a false prophet? The obvious answer is to wait and see whose prophecies come true. It is in that sense that the prophet *Ezekiel* will be a *sign*.

27. This verse signals a shift away from God's address to the people (through Ezekiel) and toward the prophet himself. The time frame signified by *at that time* is the time of Jerusalem's predicted fall.

A feature of Ezekiel's being a *sign* is that he was to react to his grief by not reacting to it per Ezekiel 24:16b–17, above. That reaction was to include silence. This verse reverses that, as the prophet's *mouth* is to *be opened* and he is allowed to *speak and no longer be silent*. The phrase *with him* refers to a man in Ezekiel 33:21–22; that passage also lifts the prophet's silence.

Involvement Learning

Ezekiel's Sign

Into the Lesson

Complete the following sentence:

An example that made a difference to me. . .

Today begins a three-week study on the life of Ezekiel: a prophet who became a “visual aid” for God’s message. In today’s study, we’ll consider the message of Ezekiel and how we can serve as a “visual aid” for the gospel.

Into the Word

Read Ezekiel 3:10–11; 24:15–24, 27. Describe Ezekiel’s mission.

Describe Ezekiel’s context.

Where was Ezekiel when he received the call?

What is significant or surprising about his call?

How did Ezekiel communicate God’s warnings?

What challenging command did God give to Ezekiel?

Why did God give this command?

Key Verse

He said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you.”

—Jeremiah 3:10

Into Life

Write down how you will be a “visual aid” to proclaim the gospel of Jesus throughout the upcoming week.

Thought to Remember

Know the message. Live the message.
Be the message.