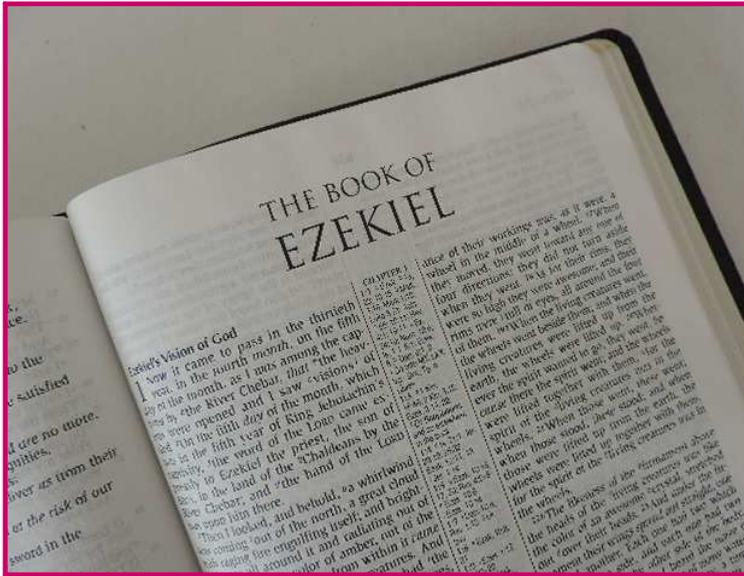


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



July 2018

Bible readings from Ezekiel chapters 1 to 21

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I have revised and added to many of the notes on Ezekiel that are printed in 'Pilgrims Under Pressure'

EZEKIEL

The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem in 597 BC and took King Jehoiachin captive to Babylon with the princes and mighty men of Judah (2 Kings 24:10–16). Ezekiel the priest was among these captives (1:1–3). Zedekiah was installed as puppet king over Judah and reigned for eleven years (2 Kings 24:17–18). He rebelled against the Babylonians who besieged Jerusalem for eighteen months (588 BC – Jeremiah 52:1–11). Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC and Zedekiah and the people, except for the poor, were transported to Babylon (Jeremiah 39:9–10).

Ezekiel would have been 13 years old when godly King Josiah died (609 BC). Josiah's sons, Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, were evil men, and his grandson Jehoiachin was no better. The twelve years under their rule were marked by evil doing. The prophet Jeremiah was vigorously opposed by the corrupt religious leaders and false prophets during this time. At the end of these twelve years, Ezekiel was among the captives taken to Babylon (597 BC).

In the fifth year of his captivity (593 BC) Ezekiel was called by God to prophesy to the captives in Babylon and to those remaining in Jerusalem. He reminded his fellow-captives that the catastrophic events of 597 BC were a result of God's righteous judgment on a rebellious people. Many of his prophecies are precisely dated and his ministry continued for at least twenty-two years (29:17). His wife died in 588 BC when the final siege of Jerusalem began (24:1,15–18). The later chapters of Ezekiel look forward to the restoration from exile and to spiritual renewal. There is much use of parable and symbolism in the book.

A recommended commentary:

Derek Thomas: God Strengthens – Ezekiel simply explained, published by Evangelical Press.

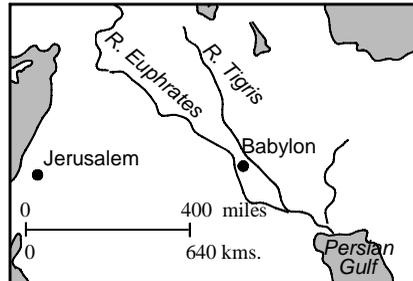
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The hand of the LORD was upon him there

Ezekiel was in his thirtieth year in 592 BC and he had been in exile for five years and was among the captives living by in exile by the River Chebar. The Chebar lay to the south of Babylon and it linked the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.



Levites became priests at the age of twenty-five and served for five years, taking up their full priestly duties at the age of thirty (Numbers 4:3; 8:24). Ezekiel was taken captive at the age of twenty-five would have been serving as a priest from his thirtieth year but now he is in wicked Babylon which seemed invincible and temples to its various idol gods were all around. He would have been traumatised by all that had happened to him.

God had not forsaken him! The heavens were opened and he saw visions of God (1). *The word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest ... and the hand of the LORD was upon him there* (3; cp. 3:14,22). The Babylonians had removed Ezekiel far from his home and country, but they could not remove him from the reach of God. *The hand of the LORD was upon him there* in captivity. This should greatly encourage us when Christians are increasingly scorned and prosecuted. **Let us remember that even in the darkest times or in the most bleak and hopeless of situations, if God's hand is upon us, we have no need to fear. If God is for us, who can be against us?** (Romans 8:31).

*A sovereign Protector I have
Unseen, yet for ever at hand
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles, and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend;
And walls of salvation surround
The soul he delights to defend.*

(Augustus M. Toplady)

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD

The Lord gave Ezekiel a strange but awesome vision of four creatures coming out of a whirlwind (‘*stormy wind*’ English Standard Version; 4). This wind was coming out of the north where Judah’s enemies, Assyria, and now Babylon, were located, Babylon was God’s instrument to punish his rebellious people. Fire was coming out of the cloud and within it, four living creatures (5). Each creature had four faces and four wings (6,10). The faces represented God’s creation: man, the apex of creation – the lion, king of the wild beasts – the ox, representing domestic animals – the eagle, chief of the birds. Beside each living creature was a wheel (15). In chapter 10, the creatures are identified as cherubim.

The four wheels rotated in harmony with each other as the living creatures moved (16–21). There was a *firmament* (ESV = ‘*an expanse*’) *like the colour of an awesome crystal* above the creatures (22) and above it was a throne (26). High above the throne was the likeness of a man, surrounded by burning splendour (26–27). What Ezekiel saw in his vision was the form of God’s Son. *This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD* (28).

Ezekiel fell on his face in awe and reverence (28). Isaiah and the apostle John were similarly overwhelmed by the glory of God (Isaiah 6:5; Revelation 1:13–17). Ezekiel’s work for God would not be easy for he was to minister to rebellious Israel (2:3–8). He was surrounded by the military might, the idolatry and superstition of Babylon but above all the difficulties was the Almighty, awesome in his majesty and sovereignty, enthroned over all the world (24,26).

We must always look beyond what we see around us and look to the sovereign Lord who is surely working out his purposes. Let us be encouraged to trust in him at all times and to persevere in prayer and service for the Son of God who loved us and gave himself to die for our salvation.

You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD’

The call and commission of Ezekiel is described in this chapter and in verses 1 to 11 of the next. God addressed him as ‘*Son of man*’ (1,3), a title used of him over ninety times in the prophecy; this title emphasises his frailty as a mere creature. He fell prostrate when he saw the awesome majesty of the almighty Creator. The Lord told the prophet to stand. The Holy Spirit then entered him and stood him on his feet (1–2).

God told Ezekiel that he was sending him to a rebellious nation (notice the number of times that the word ‘*rebellious*’ is used of the people of Jerusalem and Judah, eg. verses 3,5,6,7,8). They are also described as ‘*impudent and stubborn children*’ and ‘*hard-hearted*’ (4; 3:7). The word translated ‘*impudent*’ means ‘*hard-faced*’. They were so hard-faced that they were not at all embarrassed by their sinful ways. Jeremiah prophesied to the same generation in Jerusalem and the Lord told him that they were not at all ashamed for their wickedness, ‘*nor did they know how to blush*’ (Jeremiah 8:12). This is an appropriate description of modern times. People boast of their immoral exploits and their perverted lifestyles and do not blush. How they need to hear the gospel of Christ!

Ezekiel was called to declare the Word of the Lord to a rebellious, hard-faced and hard-hearted people? His message was to be, ‘*Thus says the Lord GOD*’ (2:4; 3:11,27). The words ‘*Thus says the LORD*’ are found 359 times in the Old Testament, 122 times in Ezekiel. The prophet of God must declare the Word of the Lord, not his own notions. He must speak the words of God, whether the people will hear him or not (2:7; 3:4). God would vindicate him – ‘*yet they will know that a prophet has been among them*’ (5). The Lord showed him a scroll and spread it before him. On it was written ‘*lamentations, mourning and woe*’ (9–10). We live in similar times to Ezekiel when God’s Word is rejected far more often than it is received. **We must persevere in declaring God’s Word to our needy generation. They need to know what God says and what he requires of them!**

Receive into your heart all my words that I speak to you

God told Ezekiel to eat the scroll that was spread before him. The eating of the scroll was a symbol of his need to feed himself upon the Word of God. The Lord said to him, ‘*Son of man, receive into your heart all my words that I speak to you, and hear with your ears*’ (10). The message was solemn but the scroll was sweet to his taste (2:9 to 3:3). It is a delight to receive God’s Word even though the message it conveys is solemn and serious (cp. Jeremiah 15:16).

God warned Ezekiel that the people would not listen to him though they spoke the same language (5–6). We do need to communicate the gospel clearly and simply, but this does not guarantee that our message will be received. We must resist the temptation to use entertainment or to water down our message in the hope that sinners will respond. God’s way of evangelism is through the hearing of his Word through preaching or personal witness (cp. Romans 10:14–17). Let us be faithful and persevere in this great work.

Ezekiel was not to be afraid of the hateful looks of his hearers for God would strengthen him. The name ‘*Ezekiel*’ means ‘God hardens’ or ‘God strengthens’. The Lord promised to make his face strong against their faces (7–8). The true servant of God will encounter opposition and Ezekiel was no exception. Ezekiel was transported by the Holy Spirit to Tel Abib (some 50 miles south-east of Babylon) where he sat among the captives for seven days without uttering a word. He went in bitterness and anger; the vision and the message that he was to proclaim had a profound effect upon him. (14–15).

Why do people reject the Word of God? The Lord Jesus said, ‘*And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil*’ (John 3:19). People are still as hard-faced and hard-hearted as they were in Ezekiel’s time. **Pray that God will be pleased to pour out his Holy Spirit on his churches, that he will revive us, and bring many thousands into his kingdom.**

I have made you a watchman

Ezekiel had been silent among the captives for seven days when God again spoke to him, ‘*Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel*’ (16–17). In ancient times the watchman had a great responsibility. He positioned himself on a vantage point in the highest part of the city, or in a specially constructed watchtower. He scanned the horizon to look for any possible danger. He would warn of invasion so that the city could prepare itself to repel the attackers. Ezekiel’s ministry was like that of a watchman – to sound out a warning.

False prophets had assured the exiles that they would soon return home (cp. Jeremiah 29:8–9,24–32). Ezekiel had to give the people a warning from God:

- The wicked man would surely perish for his sin if he did not repent. He would die without God and be lost for ever. Ezekiel was to urge the wicked man to turn from his wicked ways and live (18).
- The righteous man who turned to sinful ways would die in his sin. He must remain in the way of righteousness if he would live (20–21).

Ezekiel’s message was a matter of life or death. He had an awesome task and the Lord told him that he would require the blood of the people at his hand if he failed to warn them (18, 20). The Lord then told the prophet to go to the plain and there he again saw *the glory of the LORD* and he fell prostrate before God (22–23). The Spirit of God again entered Ezekiel and set him on his feet, telling him to shut himself in his house because he would be strongly opposed by the exiles. He was only to speak to this rebellious people when God gave him words to speak to them (24–27).

Christians are also watchmen. We must warn those around us of their plight. We must tell them about divine judgment and urge them to repent. We must proclaim the glorious message that Christ died and rose from the dead to save sinners, and that they must trust in him alone to be saved. **Are you silent? Are you ashamed of the Lord Jesus or do you joyfully witness for him? What kind of watchman are you?**

Ah, Lord GOD! Indeed I have never defiled myself

In this chapter and in the first four verses of chapter 5 Ezekiel is given four signs to give to the people. For the first sign, he had to make a model of Jerusalem on a clay tile and draw up battering rams and a besieging army around its walls. He then took an iron pan (perhaps a cooking utensil) and placed it between himself and the model of Jerusalem. This was to be '*a sign to the house of Israel*' that Jerusalem would come under siege and that God had placed a barrier between himself and the people so that he would not heed their cries for help (1–3). This would be fulfilled within five years. The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem in 588 BC and destroyed it eighteen months later.

In the second sign Ezekiel was to lie on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for 40 days when he would bear the iniquity of the people (4–8). The message was that the siege of Jerusalem would be long-lasting.

The third sign concerned Ezekiel's diet during the period he enacted the second sign. His daily portion of bread was only 20 shekels (about 8 ounces or 220 grammes) measured from a poor mixture of grain, and his water one sixth of a hin (about 1.3 pints or 0.6 litres). God told him that he would have to use human dung as fuel to bake his bread, and the prophet was horrified at the thought of defiling himself with such practices. As a godly young priest Ezekiel had been careful to keep himself from ceremonial sin. He said, '*Ah, Lord GOD! Indeed I have never defiled myself from my youth till now*' (14). The Lord permitted him to use cow dung as fuel instead; this was commonly used as fuel by some people (12–15). This sign was to indicate the severity of the famine that was to befall Jerusalem (cp. Jeremiah 52:6; Lamentations 4:4; 5:10). The Lord warned that the people would eat with anxiety and drink with dread. **Sin brings a very bitter harvest (16–17)!**

NB. '*The house of Israel*' (3) refers to the exiles in Babylon and to their fellow-countrymen in Judah. The kingdom of Israel consisting of the ten northern tribes ceased to exist in 721 BC following defeat by the Assyrians.

They shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it in my zeal

For the fourth sign, God commanded Ezekiel to cut the hair from his head and beard with a sharp sword. He was to divide it into three portions and disposed of it as described in verse 2. He was also to take a few of the hairs and preserve them in the edge of his garment (1–3). This sign was to indicate God’s judgment on Jerusalem for its wickedness. They had rebelled against God and their wickedness was greater than that of the godless nations around them. Moreover, they had defiled the temple (‘sanctuary’) of the Lord (6–11).

Many in Jerusalem had a false sense of security. They could not imagine that God, who had favoured Judah, would bring terrible judgment on their beloved city and its temple. They failed to recognise that the holy city was now a wicked city (5–6). God told the rebellious people, *‘Indeed I, even I, am against you and will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations’* (8). The suffering in the famine would be dreadful and people would resort to cannibalism in order to survive (10). One third of the city would perish in famine, a third would be slain, and the remaining third would be scattered (1–3,10,12). The small number of hairs preserved in Ezekiel’s garment may have represented the remnant of the people left in the land after the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 39:10).

Ezekiel’s message was terrible and frightening but it was true. God said that the people of Judah *‘shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it in my zeal, when I have spent my fury upon them’* (13). The wrath of God against sinners is not a popular doctrine today though it is biblical. We must declare all of God’s Word and never lull the unsaved into a sense of false security. The wonder of the gospel is that God, who is righteous and must punish sin, so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to die for sinners. Oh, what amazing love to save us from judgment and to give us forgiveness, cleansing, peace, eternal life and heaven! **Are you a real Christian? If you are not sure, please do not continue in any uncertainty. You will have no excuse if you die in your sins.**

I was crushed by their adulterous heart

Ezekiel prophesies concerning Israel as well as Judah, though Israel had already gone into captivity (cp. chapter 36:1–38, 37:15–28). He told by God to prophesy against the mountains of Israel (1–3). Pagan shrines were generally located on mountains or hills (*‘high places’*), though ravines and valleys were used for the worship of the god, Molech (cp. Jeremiah 7:31,32; 32:35). Idol worship insults the almighty God and violates the first three commandments (Exodus 20:2–6). Idolatry often involved immoral and lewd practices, and in the case of Molech, the sacrifice of children. Is it any wonder that God will severely punish idolaters for their *evil abominations* (11)? He wanted the people to know that he is the only God, the LORD! The expression, *‘You shall know that I am the LORD’* is found many times in the book of Ezekiel and four times in this chapter alone (7,10,13,14).

Many churches now take part in multi-faith services with those who worship idols and others who deny the gospel. Christians must never allow themselves to be drawn into such activities. There is a more subtle form of idolatry which ensnares many Christians; it is the pursuit of riches and pleasure (cp. Colossians 3:5). There is a solemn warning against these sins in 1 Timothy 6:9–10.

You may be tempted to wonder just what spiritual profit there can be in reading one chapter after another which warn of judgment for sin. There are in these sombre passages of Scripture rays of light and hope which point us to God who is longsuffering and full of compassion. God does not punish sinners out of pleasure (cp. 18:31–32). He said of unfaithful people, *‘I was crushed by their adulterous heart which has departed from me’* (9). The Hebrew word translated *‘crushed’* is translated *‘broken’* with regard to the idolatrous altars and idols (4,6). Unfaithfulness to God is likened to spiritual adultery throughout Scripture (eg. Hosea 1:2; James 4:4). The Lord grieves over us when we sin (cp. Ephesians 4:30). He is crushed by our backsliding and coldness of heart. **Have you wandered away from the Lord? Return to him now and grieve him no longer!**

They will seek peace, but there shall be none

Though many captives had been taken from Jerusalem in 597 BC (including Ezekiel), the Jews could not imagine that the city and the temple would be destroyed. False prophets had lulled them into a false sense of security and in this chapter Ezekiel warns that judgment is very near. He proclaimed, *‘An end! The end has come ... now the end has come upon you ... A disaster, a singular disaster; Behold it has come! An end has come, the end has come; it has dawned for you; Behold, it has come! Doom has come to you who dwell in the land; the time has come, a day of trouble is near’* (2–3, 5–7).

The Lord warned the people that it was he who would punish them. *‘Now upon you I will pour out my fury, and spend my anger upon you; I will judge you according to your ways and I will repay you for all your abominations. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity ... then you will know that I am the LORD who strikes’* (8–9). The Jews had known the protection and care of God as seen in his name ‘Jehovah-Nissi’, meaning *‘the LORD is my Banner’* (Exodus 17:15). What a shock it was for them to hear God called ‘Jehovah-Makkeh’ – *‘the LORD who strikes’*. God who pities those who fear him (Psalm 103:13) would have no pity for the wicked Jews in the day of terror.

The prophet provides a vivid picture of the terror when judgment comes. The scene set before us is one of death through famine and disease, and by the sword (15–18). The silver and the gold in which the people are trusting for security will then be useless. Their ornate idols will be carried off as plunder, unable to save themselves, let alone their worshippers (19–21). When God’s face is turned away from us, heaven is silent (22,26). The Lord said of the people, *‘They will seek peace, but there shall be none’* (25). They had squandered many opportunities to repent and now it was too late. Divine judgment was what they deserved (27). **Do you know the peace of God in your life? Are you truly saved? ‘Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near’ (Isaiah 55:6). One day it will be too late to seek him. The time to seek God is now!**

The LORD does not see us

Fourteen months had passed since God had called Ezekiel and The initial opposition to him had passed; it was now 592 BC (1; cp. 1:1–3). and we find exiled elders of Judah sitting before him. *The hand of the Lord GOD* fell upon and he had a vision of the glory of the Lord for the third time (4; cp. 1:28; 3:23). In this vision, the Spirit of the Lord carried him to the temple in Jerusalem where he saw idol worship being practised (1–3). *The image of jealousy* (3,5) was probably an image of Asherah, the Canaanite fertility goddess which provoked the Lord to jealousy. Manasseh had once put such an image in the temple, but it was later removed (2 Kings 21:7; 2 Chronicles 33:15).

Ezekiel soon saw worse! God brought him to the door of the temple court where he saw a hole in the wall. He was told to dig into the wall where he found a secret door. He went through the door and saw on the walls of the temple shrines to many gods, and seventy of the nation's leaders worshipping them (6–12). The prophet was further dismayed to see women weeping for the Babylonian god of vegetation, Tammuz (13–14). This god was supposed to be killed off by the summer heat and drought and was mourned annually each August. He was supposed to rise again the following spring.

The prophet then saw twenty-five men between the porch and the altar with their backs to the temple and facing east as they worshipped the sun (16). Priests normally offered prayer to God in this location, facing the temple (Joel 2:17). This act was one of deliberate defiance. God said that these sins were not *a trivial thing* and there was further pagan ritual when they *put the branch to their nose* (17).

These foolish rebels were saying, *'The LORD does not see us'* (12). The Lord warned them that they would surely be punished for their sin and in that day he would not pity them however loudly they cried to him (18). **If we rebel against God's holy commandments and live as if he does not see us, let us not imagine that he will hear us when he visits us in judgment!**

Begin at my sanctuary

Ezekiel now sees six men (angels), each with a deadly weapon in his hand (1). With them was another man, clothed in linen who had *a writer's inkhorn at his side* (2). This man was commanded to put a mark on the foreheads of those who had sighed and cried over all the wickedness of Jerusalem. They were marked to give them protection from divine judgment (3–6; cp. Exodus 12:23; Revelation 7:3–8). Not all in Jerusalem had forsaken God. Notice that those who were spared lamented over the wickedness of the city; they sighed and cried. We too are surrounded by all kinds of wickedness and detestable practices in Britain. It is all too easy to become so used to seeing God's laws disregarded and mocked that we become complacent. Are you burdened enough by the wickedness around you to cry out to God? Do you sigh and cry out to the Lord in fervent and urgent prayer for our rebellious and lost generation?

The glory of God was normally seen above the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies; it now moved to the front of the temple (3). The glory would later leave the temple (10:18). The Lord commanded the other angels, '*Begin at my sanctuary*' (6). The wicked, idolatrous elders were the first to perish (6; cp. 8:10–12). Judgment begins *at the house of God* (1 Peter 4:17). Those who have a knowledge of the truth and who reject God's Word will suffer greater punishment than those who are ignorant (Hebrews 10:26–31). The wicked religious leaders in Jerusalem had no excuse for their rejection of the true and living God. Church-going and any outward religious appearance will avail us nothing in the day of judgment if we are not truly saved.

Ezekiel was greatly distressed by this vision of judgment and he pleaded for a remnant to be spared (8). The Lord told him that Judah must be punished for her great wickedness, but just then, the man with the inkhorn reported that he had done all that God had commanded him (9–10). **A remnant had been saved! God is merciful and he does hear the prayers of his people.**

The glory of the LORD departed

Chapter 10 continues with the warning of the judgment to come upon Jerusalem. In his vision, Ezekiel is still standing in the inner court of the temple (8:16) where the bodies of those who were slain were lying (9:7). The prophet again saw the living creatures that he had seen at the time of his call and which he described throughout this chapter as ‘cherubim’ (eg. 20–22; cp. chapter 1). God is described in the Psalms as dwelling between the cherubim and being borne by them (Psalms 18:10; 80:1; 99:1).

The Lord told the man clothed in linen to go in among the wheels and to fill his hands with coals of fire taken from among the cherubim (2; cp. 1:13). The same man had earlier marked the righteous to spare them judgment but he is now seen as God’s instrument to scatter fire on the city (see 2 Kings 25:9 which records the fulfilment of this prophecy). Wicked Jerusalem was to suffer the fires of judgment just as wicked Sodom and Gomorrah had done centuries before (Genesis 19:24).

The glory of God is an awesome sight (Isaiah 6:1–5) and was seen when the cherubim came to the temple (3–5). The glory of the Lord stood above the cherubim at east gate of the temple where it was poised to depart from Jerusalem (18–19; cp. 11:23). *Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple* (18). When God withdraws his presence in judgment it is a very sad day. When God’s glory was withdrawn, judgment was rained down on Jerusalem (2).

When God visited judgment on the house of Eli, the ark of God was captured by the Philistines and Eli’s two sons were killed. The old priest collapsed and died when he heard the terrible news. One of Eli’s daughters-in-law died in childbirth after hearing this dreadful news. The dying woman named her new-born boy ‘*Ichabod*’, meaning ‘*the glory has departed*’ (1 Samuel 4:21). That is how it was in Ezekiel’s vision described in this chapter. **If God departs from a church, there can be no blessing. Let us always seek to honour the Lord in our churches so that we may not grieve the Holy Spirit.**

*Ah, Lord GOD! Will you make a complete end
of the remnant of Israel?*

There are two sections to this chapter, the first being a message of judgment on the self-righteous leaders who remained in Jerusalem (1–13). The second message is of hope and encouragement for the exiles in Babylon (14–25).

The cherubim were at the east gate of the temple (10:19) and the Spirit of the Lord lifted up Ezekiel and brought him there. He saw twenty-five men *at the door of the gate* of the temple (1; – not the same men as those in 8:16). They were giving *wicked counsel* in Jerusalem urging the people to build houses, implying that there would be no judgment on the city. Just as meat belongs in a cooking-pot, they belonged in Jerusalem (3). They said that they would be protected by the walls of Jerusalem just as meat in a pot is protected from the fire beneath it. That would not happen! They were complacent in their sin against God and had become like other nations, worshipping their gods (12). The only people left in Jerusalem would be those slain at the fall of the city. (7).

It was now 592 BC and within six years Jerusalem would fall and many, including its leaders would be slaughtered. These leaders and the other rebels would be led out and executed on the borders of the land (5–12). The Babylonian army captured religious, political, military leaders and sixty others in Jerusalem and led them to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon at Riblah. There, they were put to death (2 Kings 25:18–21).

Pelatiah, one of the twenty-five at the east gate of the temple (1), died even as Ezekiel was prophesying (13). The prophet was greatly moved fearing that no one would escape judgment. He fell on his face and again prayed, ‘*Ah, Lord GOD! Will you make a complete end of the remnant of Israel?*’ (13). He had a heartfelt concern for his people. **Do we have a similar concern for loved-ones and friends who are lost and those around us, so that we cry out to God for their salvation?**

Yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them

Derek Thomas writes concerning the verses before us, ‘What emerges in these verses is a key that unlocks the book of Ezekiel. Far from being “all about judgment”, Ezekiel is “all about grace”!’ (GOD STRENGTHENS, page 86). Ezekiel had asked God ‘*Will you make a complete end of the remnant of Israel?*’ (13) and the Lord now answers him. The Lord then told Ezekiel to prophesy to his fellow exiles who were looked on by those left in Jerusalem as people forsaken by God (14–15) but many of them were true believers (eg. Daniel and his three friends who were taken to Babylon in 605 BC). God had a wonderful promise for them: ‘*Yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone*’ (16). The Lord had provided a prophet for them and he would be with them.

The glory of the Lord left Jerusalem in an easterly direction, that is, towards Babylon, indicating that his presence would be with the exiles (17–23). After the vision left Ezekiel, he spoke to his fellow-captives, telling them of all the things that the Lord had shown him (24–25). **Wherever we go or find ourselves in the providence of God, he will be ‘a little sanctuary’ for us. He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5–6). Let us be reassured and rejoice in him.**

The promise of verses 19 and 20 looks beyond the return of the captives from their exile: ‘*Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may do my statutes and keep my judgments and do them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.*’ This promise is expanded in 36:26–27 where the Lord not only promises to put a new spirit within them but also to put his Spirit within them. The language of the new covenant in Christ Jesus is found in these verses (cp. Jeremiah 31:31–34 quoted in Hebrews 8:7–13).

*God of the covenant, Triune Jehovah,
Marvels of mercy adoring we see;
Seeker of souls in the counsels eternal
Binding thy lost one for ever to thee.*

(Jessie F. Webb)

He shall be caught in my snare

The Lord again described the Israelites as ‘*a rebellious house*’ (2–3,9; cp, chapters 2:3–8 and 3:9, 26–27). They had eyes to see but did not see, and ears to hear, but they did not hear. They were deliberately closing their minds to the Word of God. Jeremiah prophesied among them right until the fall of Jerusalem, but they mocked and persecuted him. They refused to take notice of his message from the Lord.

Today we read of two more symbolic messages enacted by Ezekiel:

- God told the prophet to act the part of someone who makes a hasty escape from Jerusalem at night. He had to dig a hole through the wall of his house through which he carried his belongings at twilight with his face covered (1–7). He was to explain the symbolism to the people indicating that the burden of his message concerned the prince in Jerusalem (King Zedekiah). God said that he would thwart the plans of the king who would seek to make good his escape from the city at nightfall. The Lord said, ‘*I will also spread my net over him, and he shall be caught in my snare*’ (13).
- The second message indicated that the forthcoming famine in Jerusalem would bring great fear and anxiety. The Lord told Ezekiel to eat with shaking and trembling as an indication of what was to befall the people of the city (18–20).

Ezekiel’s prophecy concerning Zedekiah was fulfilled within five years. In 586 BC Zedekiah escaped from Jerusalem at night with his men of war. The Chaldeans followed in hot pursuit and captured the fleeing king. He was taken north to the king of Babylon at Riblah. The Babylonians slew his sons before his eyes and then put out those eyes and carried him off in chains. He died in Babylon, but he did not see it on account of his blindness (13; cp. Jeremiah 52:3–11). **Zedekiah found that when God spreads his net over a man there can be no escape!** *How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?* (Hebrews 2:3). The expression, ‘*Then they*’ (or ‘*you*’) *shall know that I am the LORD*’ is found in verses 15,16 and 20 and over fifty times in Ezekiel’s prophecy.

The word which I speak will be done

Proverbs are not always wise sayings. There was a common proverb used in Judah in Ezekiel's day which said, *'The days are prolonged, and every vision fails'* (22). This was a foolish proverb which God said he would soon lay to rest. Jeremiah had been prophesying of coming judgment for over thirty years, but Jerusalem was still intact. Some of the people scorned the prophecies of doom, but they were quick to accept the flattering words of false prophets, however (24). The Lord told Ezekiel to change the proverb saying, *'The days are at hand, and the fulfilment of every vision'* (23).

Scoffers are not unique to the twenty-first century. Such people have been around from ancient times. Today's scoffers ridicule our teaching that Christ will come again as King and Judge. They scornfully ask, *'Where is the promise of his coming?'* (2 Peter 3:3–4) and fail to realise that God delays judgment because he is longsuffering and gives sinners ample time to repent. He will come suddenly *as a thief in the night* (2 Peter 3:3–13). He will judge the world, and everyone who has ever lived will be raised to appear before him (Matthew 25:31–46; 2 Corinthians 5:9–11).

Some in Judah accepted the truth of Ezekiel's prophecies, but believed that they would not be fulfilled during their lifetime. The Lord's word for these people was, *'None of my words will be postponed any more, but the word which I speak will be done'* (27–28). **God's Word will never fail – the word that he speaks shall be done!**

Derek Thomas asks, *'But is it fair that the Israelites should have to suffer this way? That is a question to which the next two chapters will respond. In case some of Ezekiel's listeners might be entertaining the idea that God's ways were in some sense in violation of what they deserved, Ezekiel underlines the false prophecy and idolatry that pervaded their lives'* (GOD STRENGTHENS, page 96).

Your prophets are like foxes in the deserts

False prophets were a problem in Ezekiel's day and they are still a problem today. They opposed the message of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and they came in for severe condemnation in this chapter. The Lord said to Ezekiel, '*Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel*' (1–2). They reassured the people that all was well when it was not well (10,16; cp. Jeremiah 14:13–18; 23:9–40). They saw visions of peace for Jerusalem when there was no peace (10,16; cp. Jeremiah 6:14). God warned the people, '*Your prophets are like foxes in the deserts*' (4). Foxes are crafty, deceitful and destructive, and so are false prophets. They utter their own foolish thoughts and not the thoughts of God (2–3). They are not sent by God and they speak nonsense and lies (6–8). They are like careless builders who cover up their flimsy wall with '*untempered mortar*' (margin = 'whitewash'). Such a wall collapses when the storm breaks (10–16). Those who believe false prophets will not escape the judgment (cp. Matthew 7:26–27).

The warnings in today's reading are very timely. We may readily detect the blatant error of the cults, but many evangelicals have been deceived into believing the utterances of self-proclaimed prophets. These people claim to have a word from the Lord but when their prophecies fail to be fulfilled, they do not apologise nor show any shame. Their followers rarely question the reason for the failed prophecies and continue to blindly follow them (cp. Deuteronomy 18:21–22).

False teachers are a great problem as well as self-proclaimed prophets. They often water down the need for repentance and some do not warn of judgment; others fail to preach that there is salvation in Christ alone. One of the Puritans wisely observed, 'The face of error is highly painted and powdered so as to render it attractive to the unwary.' The Lord Jesus Christ warned, '*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves*' (Matthew 7:15). **Let us be always on our guard and be keen to learn God's Word and to obey it.**

You hunt souls there like birds

The Lord now turns his attention to false prophetesses. These women were occult practitioners. They sewed magic charms to their sleeves and made veils for the people (18; it is probable that the veils were supposed to offer some form of magic protection). In times when people turn away from God, false religions flourish. In Britain today, over one million people indulge in one form of occult or another. Spiritism, witchcraft and fortune-telling strengthen the hands of the wicked (22). Shops selling new age books and paraphernalia are found in every town and in many villages.

The Lord said to the evil women of Ezekiel's day, '*Behold, I am against your magic charms by which you hunt souls there like birds*' (20; see also verse 18). Satan uses occult practitioners to bewitch thousands of people. Horoscopes, séances and ouija boards are not harmless fun; they are deadly dangerous! The activities of the false prophetesses discouraged the righteous but encouraged the wicked person so that he was content to continue in his wicked ways (22). Their modern counterparts never warn about coming judgment nor do they urge people to turn from their wicked ways. This is a reason for their popularity.

God warns those who lie about the future that the future will expose their claims to be false. '*Then you shall know that I am the LORD*' (23). It will then be too late for them to repent of their wickedness! Derek Thomas writes, 'Ezekiel, faithful preacher that he was, pronounced God's judgment on the frauds, liars and exploiters of his day — even if they did wear religious clothes. Those who tell lies about the future can expect, one day, to find the future has caught up with them. God's Day is coming and then his power will be seen as a force to be reckoned with' (GOD STRENGTHENS, page 99).

Let us pray that there will be a revival of Biblical Christianity in our land, that many will be delivered from Satan's kingdom of darkness and that they will embrace the truth.

These men have set up their idols in their hearts

Ezekiel became recognised by the exiles as a man through whom God was speaking. Some of their leaders came to him looking for a word from the Lord (1; cp. 33:30–31). When they were taken to Babylon, the Jews could no longer worship their idols in Jerusalem but they still loved these idols. God told Ezekiel, *‘These men have set up their idols in their hearts’* (3). The Lord’s message to these people was that if they did not repent they would surely perish (6–8). He warned that if a true prophet was persuaded to accept a bribe, offered by an idolater who was seeking a word from the Lord, God would stretch out his hand against him and destroy him (9–10). God wanted a people who would love him and serve him alone (11).

We do not have to bow down before images to be guilty of idolatry! We can have idols which we set up in our hearts and these idols will separate us from God (6–7). In such circumstances, we have no right to expect God to hear our prayers nor to guide us. *If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear* (Psalm 66:18). If we have idols in our hearts, we cannot have fellowship with God who will become remote from us and our prayers will go unanswered.

How can we know whether or not we have set up idols in our hearts? If there is anything that takes first place in our lives, that thing is an idol which usurps the place of God. Good and healthy activities such as sport and hobbies can become idols if we live for them. If we covet wealth or live for pleasure-seeking, we are guilty of idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Some are guilty of idolatry through addiction to computer games. If God is not first in our lives, we must repent of our sin and be right with him before we can know joy and contentment *Little children, keep yourselves from idols* (1 John 5:21).

*The dearest idol I have known,
Whate’er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne,
And worship only thee.* (William Cowper)

They would only deliver themselves by their righteousness

The Lord here emphasises a principle that many forget today: ‘*When a land sins against me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out my hand against it*’ (13). God gives four examples of the kind of punishment that he visits on those who are guilty of *persistent unfaithfulness* – famine, ravaging wild beasts, war and plague (13–19). The words ‘*persistent unfaithfulness*’ indicate a deliberate course of rebellion rather than a lapse into sin; it is a wilful and continual rejection of God’s Word. That was the story of Israel and Judah.

It seemed that many of the Jews believed that God would not be as severe in judgment as Ezekiel was prophesying. They reasoned that there was a righteous remnant in Jerusalem and that for their sakes God would spare the city. They may have had in mind Abraham’s intercession for Sodom (Genesis 18:23–32). Ezekiel soon corrected that mistaken notion. He told them that even the presence of Noah, Daniel and Job in Jerusalem would not bring deliverance from God’s judgment: ‘*They would only deliver themselves by their righteousness*’ (14,16,18,20).

The righteous would be spared judgment but the Lord also promised that an ungodly remnant would be brought out of Jerusalem and taken to Babylon. The words ‘*they will comfort you*’ (23) may also mean ‘they will change your mind’. **Ezekiel and his fellow-captives would see their corrupt lives and would know that God was just in bringing disaster upon the city.**

* Many Bible commentators believe that the Daniel mentioned here was not the prophet who was a contemporary of Ezekiel. They believe that he was a man with the same name who was famous in Ugaritic literature and who was renowned for his godliness.

Is it useful for any work?

The Lord asked Ezekiel a series of questions about the vine. How does the wood of the vine compare with the wood of the trees of the forest? It cannot even be used for making pegs on which utensils could be hung (3) whereas wood from many other trees can be used to make furniture. The Lord asked, ‘*Is it useful for any work?*’ (4). It is worthless except to be used as firewood and when it is burned, there is no further use for it (5). The fruitful vine is a very desirable tree, but the vine that fails to produce fruit is useless.

The vine was often used as a symbol of Israel (eg. Psalm 80:8–13; Isaiah 5:1–7; Jeremiah 2:21). God had chosen Israel to yield the fruit of godly living, to shine as a light, to be different from other nations. Visitors to that country should have seen that difference so that they acknowledged God, as did the queen of Sheba during Solomon’s reign (1 Kings 10:6–9). Israel had failed however, and was like the wood of the vine, only fit to be burned. The Lord said that he would set his face against the inhabitants of Jerusalem and they would be devoured by fire. He would make the land desolate *because they have persisted in unfaithfulness*’(6–8).

The Lord Jesus described himself as the true vine and we are the branches (John 15:1–8).. He wants us to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit (the precious fruit of the Holy Spirit; see Galatians 5:22–23). Matthew Henry points out in his Bible commentary, ‘From a vine we look for grapes, and from a Christian, we look for Christianity. That is the fruit, a Christian temper and disposition, a Christian life and conversation.’ The Lord often prunes us (eg. through chastisement, cp. Hebrews 12:5–11) in order to make us fruitful; useless branches will be burned (John 15:1–8). **How are you doing? Are you ‘*useful for any work*’ ? Please take God’s Word to heart and obey it!**

I ... entered a covenant with you, and you became mine

The Lord told Ezekiel to make Jerusalem know her wickedness. He tells the story of a baby girl who had been abandoned. Her umbilical cord was still attached and she had not been salted (a form of disinfection) nor washed (1–3). This story was an allegory of the spiritual history of Jerusalem (3). Verses 1 to 14 illustrate the wonderful grace of God.

The new-born baby girl was unwanted, unloved and thrown out into a field, covered in blood from her birth and left to perish. She was found by the Lord who decreed that she should live (4–6). He took her and cared for her until she grew into a beautiful young woman. He lavished his wealth upon her and she became renowned for her beauty and royal splendour (7–14). That's how it was with Jerusalem. God had taken her from heathendom and had lavished his love upon her people. He reminded them, *'I swore an oath to you and entered a covenant with you, and you became mine'* (8).

The grace of God in the gospel is truly wonderful! He has given his beloved Son to die a terrible death in order to save us from our sin. We were helpless, polluted and guilty in the sight of God, but he has entered into covenant with us through the blood of Jesus and has made us his own. We were dead in our sins but he made us live, giving us eternal life (6). He has clothed us with Christ's righteousness and made us beautiful. What amazing grace, what wondrous love! **Do you love the Lord? If not, could it be that you do not know him?**

*Hark, my soul! it is the Lord;
'Tis thy Saviour, hear his word;
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee,
: 'Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?*

*I delivered thee when bound,
And when bleeding healed thy wound;
Sought thee wandering, set thee right,
Turned thy darkness into light.*

(William Cowper)

You ... agitated me with all these things

Today's reading is intended to shock us. We read about the amazing grace of God yesterday (verses 1–14) and today we see the astonishing ingratitude of the people of Jerusalem. The Lord is very clear in his attitude to unfaithfulness to him; it is quite as bad as that of a wife who gives herself to prostitution (32; this theme is also found in the book of Hosea). The Lord had been very gracious to Israel, bringing his people out of bondage in Egypt, raising up godly leaders (eg. Moses and Joshua). He had given them his law and had sent prophets to warn, encourage and direct them. He had given them a good, fertile land in which to dwell and had made them a great nation.

Jerusalem owed her existence to God, but how had she shown her gratitude? She had prostituted herself to idolatry (and many of the pagan rituals involved sexual immorality or human sacrifice, 20). She had also trusted in other nations for help – Egypt, Assyria, and Chaldea, ie. Babylonia (26–29; see also Isaiah 30:1–5; 31:1–3; 2 Kings 16:7–18; 20:12–18). Men make payments to prostitutes but Jerusalem is likened to a prostitute who makes payment to her clients (33–34; cp 2 Kings 16:8–9). The Lord warned that he would surely punish idolatrous Jerusalem using the nations in whom she had trusted (her 'lovers') as the instruments of his judgment (35–43).

Jerusalem did not remember the days of her youth when she was naked and bare, and in a desperate and seemingly hopeless situation (22,43). She showed no gratitude to the Lord for all that he had done for her. The Lord said of his unfaithful people, '*You ... agitated me with all these things*' (43). Backsliding is spiritual adultery. God is jealous over us because he loves us so intensely (cp. James 4:4–5). Christian, **have you been wandering away from the Lord and agitating him by your sin? Have you been grieving the Holy Spirit?** Oh, return to the Lord and seek his forgiveness and cleansing. He will graciously receive you and heal your backsliding.

I will remember my covenant with you.

Jerusalem, Samaria (capital of the northern kingdom), and Sodom are likened to three sisters (44–46). Jerusalem, with its magnificent temple was known as the ‘*city of God*’ (Psalm 87:3) and should have been righteous in her life and government. Jerusalem should have been a place where the visiting foreigner would have seen a godly people, where he would have been convinced that Jehovah was the true and living God (cp. 1 Kings 8:41–43).

Jerusalem had sunk into greater wickedness than the other two cities (52). She had ‘*comforted*’ the wicked in their sin (54). What does this mean? When wicked people saw that the people of God were no different from themselves, they were not convicted on account of their sinful ways, but comforted and encouraged in them. She had broken the sacred covenant binding her to God, her husband (59). Why is it that the church is having so little impact on the world around us? Could it be that we have become so worldly that the world is not impressed by us and thus ignores our message? Verses 53 to 55 indicate that Sodom and Samaria will be restored as much as the wicked people of Jerusalem. This points to people of all nations following the Lord. The salvation of Gentiles was seen after the risen Christ had ascended to heaven and it continues today. Were this not true we would be lost, far from God and without hope (Ephesians 2:12–13).

The chapter closes full of promise and hope (60–63). God said that despite Israel’s unfaithfulness to him, ‘*I will remember my covenant with you.*’ This points to the new covenant in the Lord Jesus Christ (cp. 36:26; Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:7–13; 10:11–18). God promised to provide an atonement for sin (63) and we know that this was the gift of his beloved Son who was sacrificed at Calvary for us. The new covenant is sealed with his precious blood (Matthew 26:28). Let us think about the amazing love of God and the great sacrifice of Christ to save us. **May we be determined, with God’s help, always to remain faithful to him!**

I the LORD have ... exalted the low tree

The Lord gave Ezekiel a riddle to pose to the house of Israel in the form of a parable (1–10) which he went on to explain (11–21). The ‘*great eagle*’ was King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who came to Lebanon and took the eighteen-year old King Jehoiachin and his nobility (‘*the highest branch*’ of the cedar) captive in 597 BC (3–4,12). Ezekiel and many others were also exiled in Babylon at the same time. The ‘*seed of the land*’ which became ‘*a spreading vine*’ is Zedekiah whom Nebuchadnezzar appointed vassal king of Judah (5–6, 13–14). A covenant (treaty) was made between the two kings and Zedekiah took an oath of loyalty (13).

The second ‘*great eagle*’ was Pharaoh, king of Egypt who incited Zedekiah to rebel against Babylon (7, 15–17). The Lord warned Zedekiah that he would not escape punishment for breaking his covenant, but would be carried off captive to Babylon (15–21). It is likely that Ezekiel uttered this prophecy shortly before the beginning of that rebellion. Zedekiah had no excuse for breaking covenant even though it had been imposed upon him by an ungodly king. He may well have invoked God’s name in his oath for the Lord says that he had committed treason against him (20). Zedekiah’s rebellion was also treason because God had warned him that the Babylonians were his instrument to punish him and his people for their wickedness (see Jeremiah 20:4–5; 21:1–10). The rebellious vine would not thrive (9–10). **The Lord does not overlook rebellion against his Word.**

The last verses of the chapter (22–24) contain a promise of the Lord to plant a tender twig from the highest branches of the high cedar (the house of David). He said, ‘*And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree.*’ This prophecy points us to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the tender shoot (Isaiah 53:2) of the house of David. His kingdom is everlasting and he will rule over all the nations (‘*the trees of the field*’). God is gracious, and we often find a message of hope in the prophecies relating to judgment.

The soul who sins shall die

The exiles when blamed the sins of previous generations for their troubles using a proverb: *'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'* (2). They refused to accept that they themselves had any responsibility for the judgment that God had brought upon them. The Lord told them not to use this proverb. God did say that he would visit the sin of the fathers on the children (Exodus 20:5), but the verse was being misapplied by Ezekiel's contemporaries. The prophet took the case of three generations – grandfather (5), son (10) and grandson (14). The grandfather, a righteous man, has a wicked son; he in turn has a son who leads a righteous life. The wicked will die for his own sin; the righteous will surely live because he faithfully kept God's judgments (4–18).

Ezekiel showed the people that they had no excuse for their wickedness. The Lord said, *'The soul who sins shall die'* (4). The apostle Paul records in Romans chapter 1 a similar list of sins to those found in these verses. God's word through the apostle is that *those who practise such things are worthy of death* (Romans 1:32). Death came into the world through sin; *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 5:12; 6:23). Death is separation, not extinction! The soul is separated from the body at death (2 Corinthians 5:8), but the ultimate horror for the unrepentant sinner is the separation of the soul from God for ever in hell (Matthew 25:41; 2 Thessalonians 1:9).

We live in an age when collective responsibility is invariably used to excuse crime and wickedness. We are told that 'society is to blame'. Our environment and our upbringing do influence and affect us for better or for worse, but we must never use secondary causes as an excuse for our sin. True repentance accepts personal guilt and responsibility. **The Lord does not accept any excuses for sin and we must not blame-shift – we bear our own guilt (20). Let us be sure that our hearts are right with God.**

I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies

The Lord, in his justice, must punish sinners, and he pleads with the people to turn to him in repentance. It is not enough to be righteous for a while and then to turn to an ungodly lifestyle; such a person will be punished and his former goodness counts for nothing. The wicked man who repents is freely forgiven and his past is forgotten (21–22). We are not saved by our works, because our best is not good enough to save us, but we will be judged on the basis of our works (Romans 2:5–6). The evidence of genuine religion is holiness of life.

The Lord warns that temporary righteousness is not good enough. If the righteous man turns away from God to lead a wicked life, his previous righteousness is not be enough to save him from punishment. On the other hand, when the wicked person turns from his sin to obey God, he will live (23–24). The people accused God of being unfair (25,29). People are no different today; they still accuse God of unfairness while refusing to repent of their sin and to turn to Christ to be saved.

God does not delight in the death of the wicked. *He delights in mercy* (Micah 7:18). This message is repeated in our reading today (23,32; see also 33:11–20). God says, *'I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies, says the Lord GOD'* (32). What is involved in conversion? We must consider our ways and repent of our sin (28,30).

Notice the times that God calls for repentance and a turning away from sin (21,23,27,28,30,32). To repent means that our attitude to God and to our sin is radically changed. The repentant sinner begins to love God and to hate his sin. This leads to a turning away from disobedience to God's commandments (*'transgressions'*; 32) to a life which pleases God and trusts in him. Conversion involves obtaining for ourselves *a new heart and a new spirit* (31) and only God can give these. **Have you asked God to give you a new heart and to change your life? Have you repented of your sin?** If not, God's message to you is, *'Turn and live!'* (32).

A lamentation

This chapter contains a dirge which is described as ‘*a lamentation for the princes of Israel*’ (1,14). Those ‘*princes of Israel*’ were kings of Judah, Jehoahaz (1–4) and Jehoiachin (5–9; some commentators believe that Zedekiah is in mind here). The nation of Judah is seen as a lioness and Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin as her cubs who were taken into captivity in chains, Jehoahaz to Egypt and Jehoiachin to Babylon (4,9; cp. 2 Kings 23:31–34; 24:8–12).

The lament continues in verses 10 to 14 with Judah being pictured as a vine which had grown to be strong and fruitful. Her strong branches spoke of the kings that had ruled her from David to Zedekiah. This vine had been plucked up in fury (divine judgment), her strong branches were broken and withered, and fire had devoured her fruit. She was now planted in a dry and thirsty land (Babylon). Ezekiel was prophesying to the exiles by the River Chebar, warning them that Zedekiah’s kingdom was doomed, and that Jerusalem would be destroyed. The lament was a warning to the exiles that they had no hope of an early return to Judah as promised by the false prophets.

Derek Thomas asks, ‘What can we conclude from this chapter? At first glance it appears cruel to tell these exiles that Judah is going to be destroyed in a few years. We tend to reassure folk that some hope remains, no matter how dark the circumstances might be. ... So why does Ezekiel rob his hearers of what was to them their only source of comfort? The answer lies in the fact that this was not their only source of comfort! Their delivery lay, not in the power of Zedekiah or anyone else in Judah; it lay in the power of God to rescue them from their bondage. Sovereign grace was the source of their deliverance, and nothing else! **This is a lesson that needs repeating again and again ... We need to be shut in to the utter futility of every other means of rescue so that we might seek the Lord and seek his mercy. That is what Ezekiel was doing here. Far from being cruel, it was an act of mercy in itself**’ (GOD STRENGTHENS, page 135).

But I acted for my name's sake

Ezekiel was very precise with his dates (1; cp. 1:1–2; 8:1). When the elders came to him, seeking a word from the Lord, it was July/August in the year 591 BC (the seventh year of their exile which began in 597 BC). God's message for the elders was that they had no right to enquire of him because they were idolaters and they wanted to be like the idol-worshipping Gentiles (3–4, 31–32; cp. 14:3). They were no different from their ancestors who had a history of idolatry – in Egypt (5–9), in the wilderness (10–20) and in Canaan (27–29).

Israel's unfaithfulness to God was all the more terrible because he had chosen them and by solemn oath had covenanted to be their God. He had promised to bring them into a land *flowing with milk and honey*. They had no excuse for their wicked behaviour. God had made himself known to them in Egypt where they had seen his mighty signs (5–6). He had repeatedly told them that they must shun idolatry and that they must obey his Word which he had made known to them. They had rebelled, however, and had despised God's judgments (7–8; 16–20).

The Lord said, '*But I acted for my name's sake*' (9,14,22,44). His honour was at stake and he acted in judgment and in mercy. We are bound to the Lord in the new covenant and he has committed himself to be our God. He forgives us *for his name's sake* (1 John 2:12) and he leads us in the paths of righteousness '*for his name's sake*' (Psalm 23:2).

When we end our prayers with the words, 'For Jesus' sake. Amen', we are calling on God to honour his name and covenant promises to us by answering those prayers. **It is a solemn thing to see God act in judgment for his name's sake, but it is also very encouraging to know that he will hear our prayers for his name's sake.**

I will bring you into the bond of the covenant

God had chosen the nation of Israel to serve him and to be different from the heathen nations, but throughout its history there had been rebels who wanted to be like the Gentile nations. They chose to serve idols of wood and stone rather than follow God who had been so good to them (32). He promised to bring his people out of exile just as he had brought them out of Egypt and to rule over them (33–34). The people had accused God of unfairness in his dealings with them (18:25,29), but he said that he would plead his cause with them in the wilderness; (35–36); this probably refers to Babylon which is described as ‘*the wilderness*’ in chapter 19, verse 13.

The Lord said, ‘*I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant*’ (37). There is a reference here to the custom of counting sheep, one by one, as they passed under the shepherd’s staff. The Lord knows his sheep and binds them to him by covenant and he gives them eternal life (cp. John 10:27–28). There is also a warning of judgment in these verses. God said that he would purge the rebels from among them as he had done when he destroyed those who had rebelled in the exodus from Egypt centuries earlier (36–38). The surviving remnant would return to Judah where they would serve the Lord.

Those restored to the land would be purged of their idolatry and they would serve the Lord and make their offerings to him. It is a fact that after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, they never again went into idolatry. God promised to accept them as *a sweet aroma* to himself (41). They would acknowledge the gracious dealings of God in bringing them to repentance and would loathe themselves in his sight because of their past wickedness (42–44). Christian praise and sacrificial giving are an acceptable sacrifice to God, a sweet aroma (Philippians 4:18; Hebrews 13:16). Our lives are to be the fragrance of Christ in this godless world (2 Corinthians 2:15). **Is your life a sweet aroma to God?**

Does he not speak in parables?

There are four oracles in chapter 21, which in the Hebrew Bible begin at verse 45 of the previous chapter:

- The destruction of Jerusalem by fire and sword (20:45 to 21:7).
- A song of the sword (8–17).
- The king of Babylon at the crossroads (18–27).
- judgment on the Ammonites (28–32).

Chapter 20 closes with a parable about destruction by fire in the south (Jerusalem and Judah) and stresses that it was the Lord's doing. The elders complained that they did not understand Ezekiel's message of judgment. They said, '*Does he not speak in parables?*' (49). Ezekiel had reminded them of Israel's history of unfaithfulness (1–32) and they should have understood God's message to them. It may have been that they did not want to understand.

The elders had complained that they did not understand Ezekiel's parables of judgment but they were now left in no doubt that '*the south*' on which judgment would come referred to Jerusalem and its holy places and the land of Israel (46; 21:2). The picture changes from destruction by fire to death by the sword. God said that he was against the land of Israel and that judgment was inevitable (3). No one would escape this visitation of judgment and it would be a complete exile, not partial such as experienced in 597 BC when Jehoiachin was taken into Babylon with his mighty men. The Lord had drawn his sword from its sheath and would not return it (4–5). The word '*sword*' is found nineteen times in this chapter.

God told Ezekiel to sigh *with a breaking heart, and sigh with bitterness* in the sight of the elders. He was to tell those who asked him why he was sighing that it was because of the horror of the coming destruction, and to show the despair that would come upon the people. The Lord declared, '*Behold, it is coming and shall be brought to pass*' (7). **God does not make idle threats. When he threatens judgment, it will happen (6–7)!**