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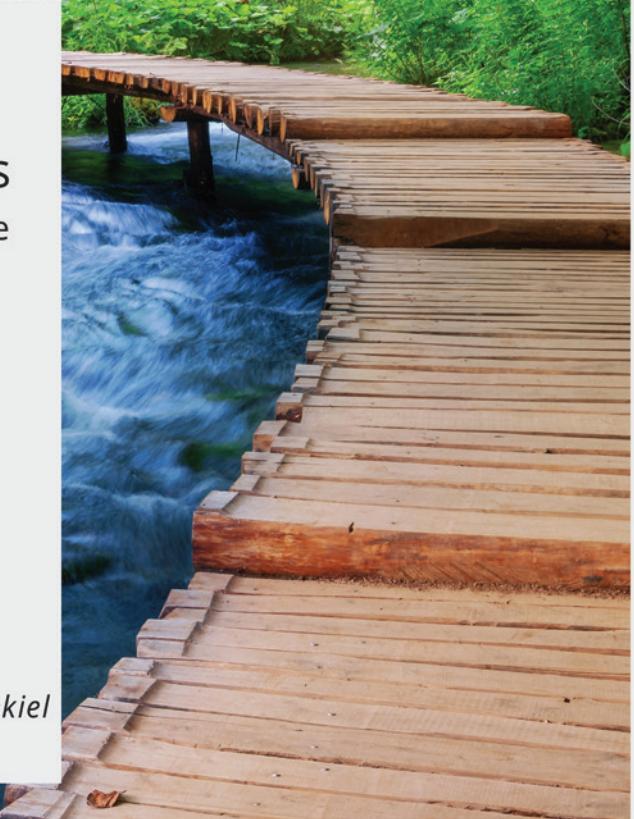
Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

Fall
23

*Lessons from the
Kings of Judah*

The Message of Ezekiel



Bible Study Guide

Contents

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Perspectives: Life Lessons 3

Unit 1: Lessons from the Kings of Judah

- 1 Sep 3 The King Who Trusted the Lord's Counsel 4**
(2 Chronicles 20:5-15, 18-22)
- 2 Sep 10 The King Who Took God's Blessings for Granted 8**
(2 Chronicles 26:1-8, 16-21)
- 3 Sep 17 The King Who Went from Bad to Worse 12**
(2 Chronicles 28:1-6, 16-25)
- 4 Sep 24 The King Who Kept Trusting God 16**
(2 Chronicles 32:1-13, 20-22)
- 5 Oct 1 The King Who Went from Bad to Good 20**
(2 Chronicles 33:1-16)
- 6 Oct 8 The King Who Ruled by the Book 24**
(2 Chronicles 34:18-31)

Unit 2: The Message of Ezekiel

- 7 Oct 15 The God Who Is Everywhere 28**
(Ezekiel 1:1-9, 15-18, 24-28a)
- 8 Oct 22 The God Who Calls Us 32**
(Ezekiel 2:1—3:4, 12-15)
- 9 Oct 29 The God Who Holds Us Accountable 36**
(Ezekiel 18:1-4, 21-32)
- 10 Nov 5 The God Who Is Our Good Shepherd 40**
(Ezekiel 34:1-16)
- 11 Nov 12 The God Who Transforms Our Hearts 44**
(Ezekiel 36:22-36)
- 12 Nov 19 The God Who Is the Spirit of New Life 48**
(Ezekiel 37:1-14)
- 13 Nov 26 The God Who Holds the Future 52**
(Ezekiel 43:1-7; 47:1-10)

Key Verse Memory Back Cover

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Mike L. Wonch
Editor

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Perspectives

Life Lessons

Growing up, I enjoyed visiting my aunt and uncle's farm. One morning I was out in a field near their house and near an electric fence. I knew not to touch it, but I kept getting closer and closer until part of me made contact with the fence. Thankfully, I only experienced a slight buzz feeling. That day I learned a life lesson: stay far away from an electric fence.

A life lesson is just that, a lesson learned from life—often from a mistake we have made. I am sure all of us can think about a time in our lives when we made a bad decision, or an unfortunate choice out of ignorance, or put our trust in the wrong person. These experiences (lessons) teach us what to do or not to do in the future. We also learn life lessons from the lives of others. We see the errors people make and it helps us to sidestep the same ones. I have seen people make life choices that led them down a destructive path. Their example helped me learn what choices to avoid.

Rather than always negative, life lessons can also be learned by the right choices and decisions we make. For example, I have learned that I feel better when I eat right and exercise (not to mention lower my cholesterol). I have learned that doing or not doing certain things are a benefit to my health. I have also learned from the example of those who have benefitted from wise eating habits and a regular exercise routine. I have seen how their right choices have turned their health and physical condition around.

Unit 1 of this quarter focuses on the lessons we can learn from the kings of Judah. We will examine their actions and discover either the positive or negative life lessons we can learn from their example. These stories were included in the Bible not only to help us understand the history of God's people, but also to help us learn spiritual life lessons from their relationship to God and others.

In Psalm 25:6, David asks of God: "Guide me in your truth and teach me." Throughout each session, invite God to guide you and show you the life lessons He wants to teach you.

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

September

3

THE KING WHO TRUSTED THE LORD'S COUNSEL

God's way is the best way to deal with our enemies.

THE WORD

2 CHRONICLES
20:5-15

Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD in the front of the new courtyard⁶ and said:

“LORD, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. ⁷Our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? ⁸They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, ⁹If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.”

¹⁰But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt; so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. ¹¹See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance. ¹²Our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

¹³All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the LORD.

¹⁴Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jahaziel son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite and descendant of Asaph, as he stood in the assembly.

KEY VERSE ¹⁵He said: “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in

Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.

18-22

¹⁸Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the LORD. ¹⁹Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

²⁰Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, “Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.” ²¹After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: “Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.”

²²As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.

ENGAGE THE WORD

KING JEHOSHAPHAT

During the period of the divided kingdom, Jehoshaphat was the fourth King of Judah (southern kingdom). He reigned for 25 years (2 Chronicles 20:31). His name means “God has judged.” Jehoshaphat’s reign was remembered as one of the “good” ones, along with his father, Asa.

Although Jehoshaphat is remembered as one of the “good” kings, there were times he was accused as a king who compromised in crucial political moments, similar to his father (2 Chronicles 16:7-9; 19:1-3). The kings remembered as “good” were not perfect and the Chronicler does not shy away from painting a full portrait of their humanity.

GOD IS WITH US

2 Chronicles 20:5-15

All prayers are prayed in a story and in a specific context. The psalms are full of storied prayers. As readers, we may not have full access to their occa-

Did You Know?

King Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing before the army, "Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever" (2 Chronicles 20:21). This "love" in the Hebrew is *hesed*. It is used over 250 times in the Old Testament. It has been defined in our English translations as "loving-kindness," "loyalty," "great love," "steadfast love," and "un-failing love." This term beautifully reflects God's loving-kindness through people to one another and God's faithfulness to us. It is a term rooted in deep covenant commitment and relationship.

sions, but they continue to connect with us through the centuries. For example, here in 2 Chronicles 20, three nations (Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites) are prepared for war on Judah's doorstep after Judah's initial defeat at Ramoth Gilead. This eastern coalition is powerful. They are described as a "vast army," and this description signals to the reader that there was an enormous amount of warriors. Upon hearing the news, Jehoshaphat decided to fast and pray (20:3). He gathered all of the people to seek God for guidance. Seeking God is one of the important themes throughout Chronicles.

In this challenging place of struggle, Jehoshaphat prays. Jehoshaphat's prayer is a "community lament" prayer (20:5-9). This includes (1) an address to God, (2) a recollection of God's past deeds and confessions, (3) an assertion of trust, (4) a complaint, and finally, (5) a request for deliverance. This prayer also reminds the hearers of three covenants from Israel's history: covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. What a powerful reminder in a moment of crisis that God has been with them and will continue to fight for them! This prayer reveals a connection to a living tradition and liturgy to God's people and how prayer has formed and shaped Jehoshaphat to face the present crisis.

The response to this lament will come from Jahaziel, a Levite who God chooses to speak through. This word from Jahaziel to Jehoshaphat is to have courage and "not be afraid" because this battle is God's battle. How often are we encouraged in places of despair through the words of another? Even in our own lives, the battle is not ours to bear alone. God is always with us and will bring others alongside us to encourage us.

PRAYER AND PRAISE MATTER

2 Chronicles 20:18-22

At this moment, Jehoshaphat reveals that he is a leader who knows that prayer and praise is what matters most. He and all the people respond in worship.

Think About It

One of the exhortations from Jahaziel is, “Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15). This leads the people to much more than momentary relief. This leads them to faith and trust in God (v. 20).

As they praise and pray, the Lord fights for the people of Judah and Jerusalem, just as Jahaziel said God would (2 Chronicles 20:15). Jehoshaphat commands the people to “Have faith in the Lord your God, and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful” (v. 20). The prophetic voice calls all people back to God. Prophets and prophetesses can be seen throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Miriam, Moses, Deborah, Isaiah). One of the keywords through the Jehoshaphat story is “with” (17:3; 18:3; 19:6; 20:17). The people are encouraged to “not be afraid” because the Lord will be “with” them (v. 17).

Experiencing fear during overwhelming circumstances is normal. Helpful reminders that we are not alone during difficult situations and seasons are vital for past and present communities of faith.

Sometimes the battles in our lives feel overwhelming, and victory seems impossible. The life and leadership of King Jehoshaphat reminds us that no matter how insurmountable our problems may seem, turning to God in prayer is a mark of faithfulness and wise leadership. May we remember that we are never alone in our difficult situations, we can always pray to the One who reveals *hesed* love, who will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6), and fights battles for us!

REFLECT

In what ways do you need God’s strength and presence to fight a battle you are currently facing?

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September

10

THE KING WHO TOOK GOD'S BLESSINGS FOR GRANTED

Taking God's blessings for granted leads to disaster.

THE WORD

2 CHRONICLES
26:1-8

Then all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king in place of his father Amaziah. ²He was the one who rebuilt Elath and restored it to Judah after Amaziah rested with his ancestors.

³Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-two years. His mother's name was Jekoliah; she was from Jerusalem. ⁴He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father Amaziah had done. ⁵He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success.

⁶He went to war against the Philistines and broke down the walls of Gath, Jabneh and Ashdod. He then rebuilt towns near Ashdod and elsewhere among the Philistines. ⁷God helped him against the Philistines and against the Arabs who lived in Gur Baal and against the Meunites. ⁸The Ammonites brought tribute to Uzziah, and his fame spread as far as the border of Egypt, because he had become very powerful.

16-21

KEY VERSE

¹⁶But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ¹⁷Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the Lord followed him in. ¹⁸They confronted King Uzziah and said, "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the

descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the **Lord** God."

¹⁹Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the **Lord**'s temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. ²⁰When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the Lord had afflicted him.

²¹King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house—leprous, and banned from the temple of the **Lord**. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land.

ENGAGE THE WORD

KING UZZIAH

With great power comes great responsibility." This famous quote, most often associated with Uncle Ben in the *Spiderman* comics, rings true for King Uzziah. One could add that with great power, a greater responsibility should come to fear God and seek godly wisdom. The beginning of King Uzziah's reign is marked by this initial humility, but it will not last his entire reign.

YOUNG KING

2 Chronicles 26:1-8

King Uzziah ascended to the throne at the young age of 16. He is called Azariah in 2 Kings, a version of the same name. One possibility for the Chronicler's use of the name Uzziah in the Chronicles account may be to avoid confusion with the priest Azariah (2 Chronicles 26:17-20). The specifics of King Uzziah's reign and accomplishments are given much more detail in the 2 Chronicles account than in 2 Kings. The introduction alerts us that he was a good king, similar to the other seven "good" rulers of Judah who are introduced with a similar introductory formula: "He did what was right in the eyes of the **Lord**" (2 Chronicles 26:4). King's Uzziah's achievements were astounding. He experienced

Did You Know?

When King Uzziah entered the temple to burn incense on the altar, which only priest were allowed to do, he was saying the Law did not apply to him. Rather than exhibiting humility, pride had distorted his kingly perspective.

military victories over Israel's infamous adversaries: the Philistines, the Arabs, and the Ammonites (vv. 6-8). He organized vast building projects and achieved impressive agricultural developments (vv. 9-10). King Uzziah's accomplishments were awe-inspiring.

In the earlier part of his reign, Uzziah had a strong desire to seek after God. Zechariah counseled him to fear God (v. 5). When King Uzziah sought God, God's favor was upon him (vv. 5-7). To fear God means to walk in the ways of biblical wisdom. King Uzziah started out as one who walked wisely, fearing God and seeking the Lord's counsel. In new landscapes of greater power, the temptation to trust in self-sufficiency rose for this king, and the tendency for God's dependency diminished.

During his reign, a shift away from trusting in God occurred. Initially, King Uzziah's reign is marked by faithfulness and seeking and fearing God. As he sustained more victories, his power and fame grew throughout the land. The text is clear that as King Uzziah gained more and more power...this became the beginning of his downfall.

PRIDE THAT LEADS TO DOWNFALL

2 Chronicles 26:16-21

King Uzziah is a formidable force at this point of the story. As readers, we are given insight that "pride led to his downfall" (v. 16). It becomes clear that at some point, King Uzziah stopped listening to the counsel of others. He acts as a priest when he enters the temple in order to burn incense on the altar of incense (v. 16). Exodus 30:1-10 details the priestly duties, and it is the priests in the line of Aaron who are given this responsibility. The king's role is distinct from the priestly role. Uzziah's inappropriate and offensive actions needed to be challenged. Confronting a king was important, but could be risky. The response of kings throughout Israel's history to a priest's confrontation is varied. Some of the more violent reactions are witnessed through Saul's violent action against the priests at Nob (1 Sam-

Think About It

King Uzziah's pride leads to his downfall. Proverbs 16:18 provides a warning about this, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." King Uzziah would have been taught wisdom sayings such as these in his education. This reveals that just because you know something, it does not automatically translate to wise or just actions.

uel 22:17-19) and even Joash's decree to put the priest, Zechariah, to death (2 Chronicles 24:21-22). The Chronicler writes, "King Joash did not remember the kindness Zechariah's father Jehoiada had shown him but killed his son, who said as he lay dying, 'May the L^{ORD} see this and call you to account'" (2 Chronicles 24:22).

Azariah was the chief priest during that time. He and 80 priests confronted the king, and King Uzziah's response was anger (26:19). He was well aware of his role as king and the specific roles of the priests, but he did not care. The priests confronted this act of unfaithfulness (v. 16) and he was cursed by God with a skin disease (v. 20). In King Uzziah's response to the priests, he revealed negligent acts towards God's holiness, sacred spaces, and sacred priestly rituals. This one defiant act had lifelong consequences for the king (v. 21). Often this skin disease is translated as leprosy; the Hebrew term, *sarat*, also speaks of this phenomena attaching itself to houses and clothing (Leviticus 13:47; 14:34, 44, 45). However, leprosy is not found on homes or clothing. Because of this, scholars have asserted that this could be some sort of fungal disease. Psoriasis has also been suggested because it is described as "white like snow" in other places (e.g., Miriam's skin disease in Numbers 12:10). This skin disease removes the prideful king from his community and the temple. He is ritually unclean and will not be able to worship with the community. His son, Jotham, will then assume these duties over the kingdom (26:21). King Uzziah's skin disease will have consequences into the grave. He will not be buried with the kings. His resting place will be in a field near them because of this skin disease (26:22). King Uzziah's pride led to a divine judgment of God, removing King Uzziah from further service in his royal position.

REFLECT

Ask God to reveal any attitudes in your life that might be considered prideful.

September

17

THE KING WHO WENT FROM BAD TO WORSE

The world's answers to problems only compound the problems.

THE WORD

2 CHRONICLES
28:1-6

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord. ²He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and also made idols for worshiping the Baals. ³He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. ⁴He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree.

⁵Therefore the Lord his God delivered him into the hands of the king of Aram. The Arameans defeated him and took many of his people as prisoners and brought them to Damascus.

He was also given into the hands of the king of Israel, who inflicted heavy casualties on him. ⁶In one day Pekah son of Remaliah killed a hundred and twenty thousand soldiers in Judah—because Judah had forsaken the Lord, the God of their ancestors.

16-25

¹⁶At that time King Ahaz sent to the kings of Assyria for help. ¹⁷The Edomites had again come and attacked Judah and carried away prisoners, ¹⁸while the Philistines had raided towns in the foothills and in the Negev of Judah. They captured and occupied Beth Shemesh, Aijalon and Gederoth, as well as Soko, Timnah and Gimzo, with their surrounding villages. ¹⁹**The Lord had humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had promoted wickedness in Judah and had been most unfaithful to the Lord.** ²⁰**Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came to him, but he gave him trouble instead of help.**

KEY VERSES

²¹Ahaz took some of the things from the temple of the L ORD and from the royal palace and from the officials and presented them to the king of Assyria, but that did not help him.

²²In his time of trouble King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the L ORD. ²³He offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, who had defeated him; for he thought, “Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me.” But they were his downfall and the downfall of all Israel.

²⁴Ahaz gathered together the furnishings from the temple of God and cut them in pieces. He shut the doors of the L ORD’s temple and set up altars at every street corner in Jerusalem. ²⁵In every town in Judah he built high places to burn sacrifices to other gods and aroused the anger of the L ORD, the God of his ancestors.

ENGAGE THE WORD

KING AHAZ

King Ahaz is the son of Jotham and grandson of Uzziah. He is mentioned in this account to have reigned over Judah for 16 years. His rule was in the shadow of the threat of the Assyrian empire during the eighth century BC.

AHAZ IS NOT LIKE DAVID

2 Chronicles 28:1-6

One of the clear negative assessments of King Ahaz’s reign is in the introductory formula for this ruler. Unlike King Jehoshaphat and King Uzziah, King Ahaz was not like his ancestor David. King Ahaz did not lead like his ancestor because he “did not do what was right in the eyes of the L ORD.” (v. 1) The list of indictments of covenant violations include burning incense on the high places, committing acts of idolatry, sacrificing children in the fire (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chronicles 28:3), and syncretism. (*Syncretism* is when multiple religious practices are intermingled. See 2 Kings 16:4 and 2 Chronicles 28:2.) Some of these detestable practices took place in the Valley of Ben Hinnom. It was a site that was associated with constant fires and the worship of the Baals, Molek (1 Kings 11:5), and human sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31-32).

Did You Know?

Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria, kept royal accounts of his military victories by carving scenes on the walls of the palace he built in Nimrud. This location is in Northern Iraq. There is an alabaster panel of Tiglath-Pileser III on his war chariot in the British Museum in London.

UNFAITHFUL

2 Chronicles 28:16-25

King Ahaz's actions reveal he was unfaithful to the Lord in several areas. Rather than repenting and turning back to God when difficulties arose—such as praying or seeking wisdom from God and the prophets—Ahaz responded with his own wisdom and continued in even greater unfaithfulness.

One example the biblical writers give in detail regarding his infidelity is when King Ahaz replaced Solomon's altar with one of Assyrian religious designs. It describes this action in 2 Kings, "The King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria. He saw an altar in Damascus and sent to Uriah the priest a sketch of the altar, with detailed plans for its construction" (see 2 Kings 16:10-16). The priest Uriah finished this altar before the king's return. This one-act is significant, revealing King Ahaz's unfaithfulness, and is an essential example of this trajectory leading to the nation's downfall.

The reigns of King Ahaz's forerunners contribute to a very hostile environment. South of Judah, there is hostility from the Philistines and Edomites. The Philistines seek to recover and retaliate from the victories of King Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:6). In the north, the Syro-Ephraimite coalition (the partnership between Syria [or Aram] and Israel [or Ephraim]) press heavily on King Ahaz. The Syro-Ephraimite war (2 Chronicles 28:5-15) was a ruthless war and a danger to the line of David. Rather than pray or listen to the prophets, King Ahaz turns for military aid from Assyria (28:16).

Ahaz trusts in the aid from Assyria and refuses to listen to the prophets. One example is when the Lord invites Ahaz to ask for a sign. God spoke to Ahaz: "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights" (Isaiah 7:11). Ahaz foolishly refuses the words of the Lord and replies, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test" (Isaiah 7:12). Ahaz's refusal to listen to the Lord and the

Think About It

Ahaz seeks “help” from foreign kings (2 Chronicles 28:16) and foreign gods (2 Chronicles 28:23) rather than turning to the Lord. The Hebrew term for “help” (*zr*), is witnessed all throughout the psalms (Psalm 10; 3; 54; 118; 121) in key moments of distress as worshipers call on God as the one who helps. In some of these dark moments in Israel’s history, when leaders have sought help from the Lord, incredible things have happened (e.g., Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Deborah). It can seem handy to rely on help from people or places that are convenient, but the story of Ahaz can serve as a reminder to first seek help from the Lord!

prophets results in continual unfaithfulness and unwise decisions.

At the request of King Ahaz, Assyria assists in a victory, but the losses are significant. The heavy annual tribute placed on Judah brings economic hardship. In desperation, rather than pray and seek the Lord, Ahaz took items from the temple and palace for tribute, but to no avail (28:21). One would imagine that Ahaz may decide to turn to God, but he “became even more unfaithful to the Lord” (2 Chronicles 28:22) and he leads others to worship false gods.

There is a wordplay with “help” (*zr*). Ahaz seeks help from the kings of Assyria (28:16), and rather than help he receives “trouble” (v. 20). So in this “time of trouble” he seeks help from the gods of Damascus, but to no avail. The Levitical priests did not resist King Ahaz’s demands. He took the temple furnishings and cut them to pieces, closed the temple doors, and placed altars for false worship “at every street corner in Jerusalem” (28:24). His apostasy was “his downfall and the downfall of all Israel.” (28:23).

King Ahaz’s refusal to follow God and keep covenant promises has consequences for Judah’s people. These consequences continue after his death as he was not laid to rest in the tombs of the kings with his ancestors (2 Chronicles 28:27).

REFLECT

In what ways do you need God’s wisdom today?

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

September

24

THE KING WHO KEPT TRUSTING GOD

God takes care of those who remain committed to Him.

THE WORD

2 CHRONICLES
32:1-13

After all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah. He laid siege to the fortified cities, thinking to conquer them for himself. ²When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and that he intended to wage war against Jerusalem, ³he consulted with his officials and military staff about blocking off the water from the springs outside the city, and they helped him. ⁴They gathered a large group of people who blocked all the springs and the stream that flowed through the land. “Why should the kings of Assyria come and find plenty of water?” they said. ⁵Then he worked hard repairing all the broken sections of the wall and building towers on it. He built another wall outside that one and reinforced the terraces of the City of David. He also made large numbers of weapons and shields.

⁶He appointed military officers over the people and assembled them before him in the square at the city gate and encouraged them with these words: ⁷**“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him.**

⁸With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles.” And the people gained confidence from what Hezekiah the king of Judah said.

⁹Later, when Sennacherib king of Assyria and all his forces were laying siege to Lachish, he sent his officers to Jerusalem with this message for Hezekiah king of Judah and for all the people of Judah who were there:

¹⁰“This is what Sennacherib king of Assyria says: On what are

KEY VERSE

you basing your confidence, that you remain in Jerusalem under siege? ¹¹When Hezekiah says, ‘The **LORD** our God will save us from the hand of the king of Assyria,’ he is misleading you, to let you die of hunger and thirst. ¹²Did not Hezekiah himself remove this god’s high places and altars, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, ‘You must worship before one altar and burn sacrifices on it’?

¹³“Do you not know what I and my predecessors have done to all the peoples of the other lands? Were the gods of those nations ever able to deliver their land from my hand?

20-22

²⁰King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz cried out in prayer to heaven about this. ²¹And the **LORD** sent an angel, who annihilated all the fighting men and the commanders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king. So he withdrew to his own land in disgrace. And when he went into the temple of his god, some of his sons, his own flesh and blood, cut him down with the sword.

²²So the **LORD** saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all others. He took care of them on every side.

ENGAGE THE WORD

KING HEZEKIAH

King Hezekiah ruled Judah (southern kingdom) in the eighth century BC. His reign is marked by a positive theological review, “Hezekiah trusted in the **LORD**, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him” (2 Kings 18:5-6).

INVASIONS BY ASSYRIA

2 Chronicles 32:1-8

Key leaders are often compared to others to illustrate significant differences. The writer of Chronicles compares Hezekiah to Sennacherib, and also to Ahaz. A succinct chronological account is not a priority for the biblical writer (see 2 Kings 18:13-16). Rather, the Chronicler is prioritizing a theological message. As is evident in verses 1-8, Hezekiah was involved in an anti-Assyrian coalition, unlike his father Ahaz.

One of the critical moments of Hezekiah’s reign was with his preparation for the incoming invasions

Did You Know?

Hezekiah conducted extensive religious reforms, including a re-dedication of the temple. Hezekiah experienced success with his military battles and was able to establish stability through his empire. Hezekiah called out for Israel to return to God, "Return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that he may return to you" (2 Chronicles 30:6).

SENNACHERIB

by Assyria. Hezekiah reveals a leader who prays and prepares when the threat of invasion presses upon Judah. He is a leader of prayer and action!

Some of the ways that King Hezekiah prepares for the oncoming battle is to shut off the freshwater from around the city, repair the walls, and forge and stockpile weapons and shields (vv. 3-5). He also appointed military leaders (v. 6) and encourages his people to be "strong and courageous" because with the Lord on their side, they had the "greater power" (v. 7). His leadership reminded the people to trust in the Lord. The effect of his leadership style resulted in ways that strengthened others. The people of Judah "gained confidence" (v. 8).

2 Chronicles 32:9-13

Sennacherib offers a counter-voice to Hezekiah's speech. Sennacherib taunts Judah and claims that the Lord is not worth their confidence. He provokes them and proclaims that the Lord is misleading the people of Judah. Because they are under attack, these words may have begun to penetrate their thoughts (v. 10). Sennacherib places a siege's worst fears before them, which is to die of hunger and thirst (v. 11). A siege brings out the darkest deeds for survival. King Sennacherib invites them to recall all the times they have been conquered in the past. He seeks to shake them to their very core of trust and faith in God and in their King, Hezekiah (v. 13).

PRAY AND PREPARE

2 Chronicles 32:20-22

Hezekiah shines as a leader in these next verses. Rather than cave in to fear and discouragement, Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah respond through prayer (v. 20). Sennacherib's "arm of flesh" (2 Chronicles 32:8) will be matched through God's response of sending an "angel" to fight for Judah (v. 21). After the prideful taunts, there is a dark irony the Chronicler draws out with the death of King Sennacherib. Though the

Think About It

One of the marks of Hezekiah's leadership is that of an encourager. This trait transcends time and place (2 Chronicles 30:22; 32:6-8). When people are in crisis, encouragement is needed. King Hezekiah is known as one who meets dark moments with words of real hope.

timeline in verses 20-22 appears immediate, it occurs about 20 years later. The Chronicler is revealing/highlighting that this powerful Assyrian force in the ancient Near East is not greater than the hand/arm of the Lord. The Chronicles account leaves out some of Assyria's victorious moments (2 Kings 18:13-16) in order to focus on comparing the pious and faithful King Hezekiah with the unfaithful and prideful King Sennacherib of Assyria. Similar to an artist choosing certain key people and items in a painting for the viewer, the literary artistry of the Chronicler involves making these decisions in order to paint a theological message for the reader. In this twist of irony, Sennacherib flees the war and seeks refuge in the temple of his gods. Rather than being met by safety and sanctuary, he is met by the sword. He was slain by the hands of his own son, Adrammelech.

The repetition of the words "save" and "deliver" (32:11, 13, 14, 15) highlights the question: Will the Lord be able to save Judah? The taunts by Sennacherib bring this question to the fore. Hezekiah continues to encourage the people to pray and prepare. Indeed, the Lord is mighty to save and is with them and fights their battle. Hezekiah's reign is remembered in a favorable light. He will be buried in a place of special honor. "Hezekiah rested with his ancestors and was buried on the hill where the tombs of David's descendants are. All Judah and the people of Jerusalem honored him when he died" (2 Chronicles 32:33).

REFLECT

Think about how you can rely on God's "greater power" today.

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

October

1

THE KING WHO WENT FROM BAD TO GOOD

No one is beyond the reach of God's grace.

THE WORD

2 CHRONICLES
33:1-16

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. ²He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. ³He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. ⁴He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, “My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever.” ⁵In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. ⁶He sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger.

⁷He took the image he had made and put it in God's temple, of which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, “In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever. ⁸I will not again make the feet of the Israelites leave the land I assigned to your ancestors, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them concerning all the laws, decrees and regulations given through Moses.” ⁹But Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites.

¹⁰The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. ¹¹So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. ¹²In

KEY VERSES **his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors.** ¹³**And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God.**

¹⁴Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah.

¹⁵He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. ¹⁶Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel.

ENGAGE THE WORD

KING MANASSEH

Manasseh was King over Judah for 55 years during the first half of the seventh century (2 Chronicles 33:1). Part of this reign includes co-regency with his father, King Hezekiah. Manasseh has the longest reign recorded among the kings of Israel. His reign was tumultuous during the height of Assyrian power.

The account of King Manasseh's reign appears slightly different if you compare the reports in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. One of the helpful ways to approach these differences is to recognize that they were written during different time periods. The questions the community and writers would have been asking impacted the ways King Manasseh's reign was perceived. Hind-sight can soften how a narrative is incorporated in a community's memory and how it is perceived in a new environment, such as exile. The 2 Chronicles account offers a more compassionate viewpoint of Manasseh, revealing perspectives of repentance and hope.

APOSTASY

2 Chronicles 33:1-10

The beginning of King Manasseh's reign is marked by apostasy. He rebuilt the high places (v. 3). The

Did You Know?

The Rassam Cylinder, from the Library of Ashurbanipal, is a clay cylinder that details the royal records of Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria. On this cylinder, Manasseh and the kingdom of Judah are listed among the compliant kings. Today, this cylinder is located in the British Museum in London.

high places are worship sites that are built on hills or elevated areas. These provide a closer proximity to deities. Once the temple was erected, high places were often connected to false worship since they became associated with the worship of false gods. There is a pattern of a king being associated with faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Lord when they demolish and remove “high places” (faithful acts) or erect them (unfaithful acts). This external act reflects an internal disposition. Manasseh’s father, King Hezekiah, removed the high places. Manasseh “rebuilt” them, erected altars to the Baals, crafted Asherah poles, engaged in false worship, and even worshiped the starry hosts. The stars and planets in the ancient Near East were associated with certain gods and goddesses (i.e., Venus as Ishtar and the sun as Shamash [Mesopotamia]; Venus as Astarte and the sun as Shaphash [Ugarit]). Manasseh even sacrificed his children in the fire (v. 6). All of Manasseh’s unfaithfulness is judged as “evil in the eyes of the Lord” (v. 6). The Lord reached out to Manasseh and his people but they continued in their evil ways (v. 10).

THE LORD LISTENED

2 Chronicles 33:11-13

The Chronicler next records that to get the attention of Manasseh, the Assyrian army is sent to invade Judah. We see this pattern as a way of understanding why trouble descends upon Israel. Throughout the book of judges, when the people are unfaithful and “do evil in the eyes of the Lord” and break covenant, an oppressive external (sometimes internal, e.g., Judges 19—21) force descends upon Israel. In these moments of distress, Israel cries out to the Lord, and the Lord responds with grace and mercy, often raising up a deliverer to rescue them. Here, Manasseh is captured by the Assyrian army (v. 11).

Being led by “shackles” and a “hook in his nose” is a way to dishonor and shame a rival ruler (see Amos 4:2). This act of humiliation has the desired effect.

Think About It

Manasseh's moment of repentance is uniquely witnessed in this chapter in the Old Testament (2 Chronicles 33:13). This moment highlights the character traits of God such as compassionate and forgiving, even after all of the terrible things Manasseh did. Manasseh responds to God in humility and God is moved by Manasseh's request.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S MERCY

Without power, Manasseh is humbled enough to pray and seek out the Lord's favor (v. 13). In the Hebrew, seeking favor is to "to soften one's face." This is a powerful expression that we see with the prayers of others, such as Moses in Exodus 32:11 (when Moses interceded after the golden calf incident). Unlike Ahaz, Manasseh prays to the Lord in his moment of difficulty. Even after all of Manasseh's wicked deeds, the Lord listens and is moved to show mercy.

The Lord cares about His people and cares about us. This special revelation of relational terms for the Lord is unlike the gods in the ancient Near East. The Lord desires to show mercy and grace, even after leaders (and all of us!) blow it. Even though the people do not listen, the Lord listens (33:10, 13): "Then Manasseh knew that the **Lord** is God" (v. 13).

2 Chronicles 33:14-16

Manasseh responds to the mercy of God by repairing political and religious ruptures. He rebuilds the wall, which may have been destroyed by the Assyrian invasion. Similar to his father, Hezekiah, Manasseh removed the items of false worship (v. 15). Even after all the evil things that Manasseh did, he was not out of the compassionate reach of a holy and merciful God: "The **Lord** is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8).

REFLECT

Take time to think about God's compassion and mercy.

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

October

8

THE KING WHO RULED BY THE BOOK

God's Word changes those who humbly apply it to their lives.

THE WORD

2 CHRONICLES
34:18-31

Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

¹⁹When the king heard the words of the Law, he tore his robes. ²⁰He gave these orders to Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king’s attendant: ²¹“Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the remnant in Israel and Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD’s anger that is poured out on us because those who have gone before us have not kept the word of the LORD; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book.”

²²Hilkiah and those the king had sent with him went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tokhath, the son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter.

²³She said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, ²⁴‘This is what the LORD says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people—all the curses written in the book that has been read in the presence of the king of Judah. ²⁵Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all that their hands have made, my anger will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched.’ ²⁶Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: ²⁷Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and

its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the **LORD**. ²⁸Now I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place and on those who live here.”

So they took her answer back to the king.

²⁹Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. ³⁰He went up to the temple of the **LORD** with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the **LORD**. **31****The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the **LORD**—to follow the **LORD** and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book.**

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

KING JOSIAH

King Josiah came to the throne at the young age of eight after his father, Amon, was assassinated (2 Chronicles 33:21-25; 34:1). His mother was Jediah (2 Kings 22). Unlike his father, Josiah followed the instructions of God. Instruction was critical for his spiritual development. Josiah's reign is remembered as one modeled after King David: “He did what was right in the eyes of the **LORD** and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left” (2 Chronicles 34:2).

Josiah represents a model king by his faithfulness and righteousness. He is given even higher praise than other good kings in the 2 Kings account, which says, “Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the **LORD** as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25). Josiah's reign included key movements such as a religious reform (2 Chronicles 34:1-7), instructions to repair the temple (34:8-13), and a Passover celebration (35:1-19).

Did You Know?

The Hebrew terms for the prophetic role are prophet (*nābî* [male prophet]; *nabi'ah* [female prophet]), seer (*rō'eh* and *hōzeh*) and “man of God” (*îs elōhîm*). At times these terms are interchangeable (e.g., 1 Samuel 9:8-10). In addition, there are accounts of true prophets and false prophets (Deuteronomy 18; Jeremiah 28).

THIS WHAT THE LORD SAYS . . .

During the temple repairs, a significant discovery was made. Hilkiah, the priest, found the “Book of the Law of the L ORD that had been given through Moses” (34:14). He immediately gave it to Shaphan, Josiah’s scribe/secretary and royal messenger, to bring before King Josiah.

2 Chronicles 34:18-28

Once the Book of the Law was discovered, Shaphan read it before King Josiah (v. 18). Upon hearing the words, King Josiah responded by tearing his clothes, a sign of distress and humility (v. 19). King Josiah sent Hilkiah, Abdon, and Shaphan to inquire of the Lord. Josiah desired to seek understanding because the people of Judah failed to do what the Law required. They knew they needed to speak to the female prophet, Huldah.

The Old Testament refers to four named women prophets: Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah, and Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14). There were also several unnamed women prophets (e.g., Isaiah 8:3). Prophets have a unique role as ones called by God to deliver the word of God. When the big news of the Book of the Law reached King Josiah, Huldah is sought out for council (2 Chronicles 34:22). Huldah is a known and trusted court prophet. Her husband, Shallum, is described as “keeper of the wardrobe” (v. 22). His position was likely as a member of the royal court because this wardrobe was connected to either the king or the high priest.

Huldah shares a prophetic oracle that begins with the standard form, “This is what the L ORD, the God of Israel, says . . .” (v. 24). Even though we have three other named female prophets, Huldah is the only one with a record of an oracle in this standard prophetic formula. This oracle will include challenging and encouraging words for King Josiah and the people of Judah. The first part comprises words of punishment that outline the curses of Deuteronomy 28 for break-

Think About It

King Josiah was well known and loved throughout the kingdom. The prophet Jeremiah was a contemporary and compiled laments for him. "Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day, all the male and female singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments" (2 Chronicles 35:25).

RENEWED COVENANT

ing covenant and idolatry (vv. 24-25). The second part of the oracle is one of salvation, detailing Josiah's acts of "humbling himself" through actions of lament and repentance (vv. 27-28).

2 Chronicles 34:29-31

King Josiah responds with a covenant renewal ceremony. He gathers all the officials, priests, Levites, and people of Judah to take part in this ceremony (v. 29). He reads the entire words of the "Book of the Covenant" (v. 30). This phrase, "Book of the Covenant," is not common. This scroll is called "Book of the Law" earlier (v. 15). Some scholars suggest that this scroll could refer to the entire Pentateuch; others see a connection to the book of Deuteronomy, or even the Sinai covenant code (Exodus 19—24).

What is central to this narrative is the response to the finding of this document. The reading of the words of this scroll were read aloud before the entire community, not only the elite few. Upon hearing the words, the people of Judah take part in a covenant renewal ceremony. This is an awareness of the words of Huldah, that they have not been loyal and faithful. Yet, Josiah calls them to obey the words of life found in the discovery of the Book of the Covenant. The people humble themselves, repent, and turn back to the Lord. This covenant renewal involves new hope for divine blessing and life for the entire community (Deuteronomy 28).

REFLECT

In what ways can your life be an example of faithfulness to others this week?

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

October
15

THE GOD WHO IS EVERYWHERE

God shows up in unexpected places and in unexpected ways.

THE WORD

**EZEKIEL
1:1-9**

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

²On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—³the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the Lord was on him.

⁴I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, ⁶but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.

15-18

¹⁵As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. ¹⁶This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like topaz, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. ¹⁷As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change direction as the creatures went. ¹⁸Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

24-28a

²⁴When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.

²⁵Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. ²⁶Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. ²⁷I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. ²⁸**Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.**

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

Ezekiel discovered that the distance between heaven and earth is much closer than one might imagine. God could be wherever Ezekiel was. Regardless of the prophet's circumstances or location, God was there. He experienced God's presence in the most difficult places and unexpected spaces of life, because God rules over all cases from His throne in heaven.

GOD IN DIFFICULT PLACES

Ezekiel 1:1-3

Ezekiel's life had taken a major turn about five years before this experience. The unimaginable had happened. Israel's leadership failed and Babylonians invaded his homeland. Jerusalem was ransacked and the temple stripped bare. Many died and many more became hostages along with Judah's king and other high officials. Ezekiel ended up in a refugee camp with many of his fellow countrymen 900 miles from home.

"In the land of the Babylonians," which we know today as Iraq, the trauma of loss, disappointment, and confusion weighed heavy upon Ezekiel and his people (v. 3). The prophet's lifelong plans to be a priest in the Jerusalem temple were put on hold. His "thirtieth year" should have been the year his service began (v. 1). To make matters worse, this was the land of Marduk, the god of the Babylonians who had conquered Israel and most of the Middle East. Did Marduk rule

Did You Know?

Lapis lazuli is a deep blue gemstone that artists cut and polish to make jewelry and other ornamental items. The Hebrew term *sappir* is more often translated “sapphire” in other English translations.

GOD IN UNEXPECTED SPACES

the world now? Was Israel’s God just another deity in Marduk’s pantheon?

Yet, in the midst of all of this, “the heavens were opened” and Ezekiel “saw visions of God” (v. 1). The Lord drew back the curtain of confusion and the drape of disappointment and put His hand on Ezekiel. In the midst of our most trying times, God lets us know He is still there.

Ezekiel 1:4-9, 15-18

Like many priests and prophets of his time, Ezekiel might have imagined that God would reveal himself in a temple. Or perhaps, as others thought, God would come through quiet contemplation in a desert retreat. Or maybe, like Moses, God would reveal himself on a mountain or through a burning bush.

But God did not come in any of those ways. God came to Ezekiel in a wind storm filled with spectacular and surreal images. In the midst of a thunderhead, a fire blazed like a metal worker’s furnace. Surreal creatures and chariot wheels moved about freely in perfectly synchronized rhythm. The creatures, each with four wings and four faces, represented the lords of earth’s domains: the lion as the king of beasts, the ox as strongest of domestic animals, the eagle as the most dominant among birds, and the human as the crown of creation. These four formed the entourage for the throne of the Lord of Lords.

Everything in this space was “like” something Ezekiel had seen before, but not exactly. Nothing on earth is quite the same as in heaven. God appeared to the prophet in a way no one had ever experienced before or since. Just as the creatures and wheels moved freely in any direction they desired, so the Lord moves as He pleases.

The infinitely creative Lord of the universe has no restrictions on how or when He might reveal himself. So, we must remain attentive like Ezekiel. Our pre-conceived notions of how God might show up may

Think About It

In Ezekiel's time, prophets often camped out in the temple of their gods in order to receive a divine message. This was not an option for Ezekiel in a foreign land, but God came to him anyway.

GOD OVER ALL CASES

be shattered. But God will make himself known to us anytime and anywhere He decides to do so.

Ezekiel 1:24-28a

Above all the sights and sounds of the creatures Ezekiel saw God sitting on a dazzling throne made of precious gemstone. God appeared as "a figure like that of a man" (v. 26). Yet, He glowed like hot metal in a furnace, which gave off intense light surrounded by the colors of the rainbow (v. 27). It was breathtaking, heart-stopping, and mind-blowing. The vision overwhelmed the prophet. As a priest Ezekiel knew, or at least he thought he knew, that he could not see God and live. So, the prophet explained that he did not actually see God. He saw "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (v. 28)

However, the point was not so much what Ezekiel saw, but that God saw Ezekiel. From high upon His throne God saw everything, because the Lord still reigned over everything. God saw a confused and disappointed prophet in a refugee camp far from home. Though God sat above all the mess of human life, He came down into that mess. God met Ezekiel where he was.

Regardless of where we may find ourselves today, God remains on the throne of the universe. High above the confusion of this world, its troubles, its trauma, its disappointments, and its sorrows, God still reigns. He is not an unconcerned leader like we might see on earth. God comes down and speaks to us in difficult places and in unexpected spaces. God who is above everything can also be everywhere.

REFLECT Today, open your eyes and look for places where God might be working in unexpected ways.

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October
22

THE GOD WHO CALLS US

God provides whatever is needed to fulfill His call on our lives.

THE WORD

**EZEKIEL
2:1-10**

He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” ²As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

³He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. ⁴The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says.’ ⁵And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them. ⁶And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. ⁷You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. ⁸But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you.”

⁹Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, ¹⁰which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

**EZEKIEL
3:1-4**

KEY VERSE

¹And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.” ²So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.

³Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

⁴He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them.

12-15

¹²Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound as the glory of the **LORD** rose from the place where it was standing. ¹³It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound. ¹⁴The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the **LORD** on me. ¹⁵I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days—deeply distressed.

ENGAGE THE WORD

God came to Ezekiel in a spectacular vision in order to encourage him during difficult days. But God also had something else in mind. He wanted Ezekiel to be His spokesman to those around him. They needed a word from God in the midst of their difficult circumstances too. This call was extremely challenging. But God promised to give him the words and the strength he would need to fulfill it.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE CALLING

Ezekiel 2:1-8

God did not call Ezekiel to an easy assignment. The prophet would not find a welcoming setting where tender hearts eagerly awaited to hear from God. Open-minded, appreciative, receptive listeners did not populate his congregation. Rather, according to God, they were “a rebellious nation” (v. 3). They had openly revolted against God’s kingship, as the word “rebellious” implies. Further, they were “obstinate and stubborn” (2:4), set in their ways and not about to change. They were intent on forging their own path. The trauma of exile in a Babylonian refugee camp had hardened their hearts and made them bitter.

What a difficult group with which to work! How discouraging to speak about God to such people! Why would anyone even try? Maybe Ezekiel should try

Did You Know?

God regularly called Ezekiel “son of man” in order to emphasize his human frailty in contrast to God’s divine power. As King of the Cosmos, God alone is sovereign over all.

because these people so desperately needed to hear God’s words. Perhaps the most obstinate and unlovable need to know of God’s love the most. Rebellion and stubbornness are often only cover-ups for fear and insecurity. They may even be a veiled cry for help.

So, God instructed Ezekiel not to be afraid or worried about the results. Ministering to these people would be prickly, like walking through “briers and thorns” (v. 6). Their words might feel like the sting of “scorpions” (v. 6). But God instructed Ezekiel to be faithful and not worry about the outcome.

THE WORDS FOR THE CALLING

Ezekiel 2:9—3:4

Ezekiel did not need to be concerned about what he might say to the people. God would provide the message. Unfortunately, it was a message of “lament and mourning and woe,” the kinds of words spoken at a funeral (2:10). God’s words through Ezekiel would prepare people for the death of their nation, the saddest event in Israel’s history. Within a few years of Ezekiel’s call to ministry, Babylon would completely destroy Jerusalem, its temple, and its kingship. Thousands would die and thousands more would be taken into exile. All the ancient promises to Abraham and to David would seem cancelled.

Such a message would not be easy to stomach. But that is exactly what God asked Ezekiel to do. In the vision, God handed the prophet a scroll with words of doom written on it and told him to eat it. The words of God must become part of Ezekiel’s very being. The prophet’s preaching would be no academic exercise. It must come from his heart.

Surprisingly, the words God gave Ezekiel “tasted as sweet as honey” to him (3:3). Perhaps this was because they were truthful words. There is something satisfying about the truth, whether it encourages or condemns. Ezekiel’s messages would not be politically correct, but they would be correct. The truth is: sin destroys nations as well as individuals.

Think About It

People rarely experience God's calling like Ezekiel did. Most of the time God calls us in more ordinary ways, speaking to us through Scripture, in prayer, or through other people.

THE STRENGTH FOR THE CALLING

Ezekiel 3:12-15

Like most people that God calls, Ezekiel did not have what it took to fulfill his vocation. The message was hard to hear and the people to whom he would deliver it were unreceptive. Ezekiel could not look within himself and somehow come up with what was needed.

So, the Spirit of God "lifted" the prophet and took him where he needed to go (vv. 12, 14). The spectacular sights and sounds of the vision surely impressed Ezekiel. But they were not enough. The prophet needed God's enabling Spirit in order to accomplish the ministry given him. The Holy Spirit has always been and will always be the power behind effective ministry.

The vision left Ezekiel in an emotional turmoil. He was angry and bitter at the stubbornness of his neighbors, undoubtedly feeling God's disappointment over their obstinacy. Yet, "the strong hand of the L^{ORD}" took hold of Ezekiel and redirected his emotions into a passionate love for people (v. 14). Under the guidance of the Spirit, the prophet "sat among them for seven days" processing all that God had shown him and letting God shape his heart (v. 15). Rather than burst forth in condemnation, he did not speak until God gave him the words to say. While his preaching must be strong, it also must be filled with compassion.

Though Ezekiel had been called to a challenging ministry, God provided the words and courage to fulfill it. God always provides the resources needed to accomplish His purposes in this world. Of this we can be sure today. Wherever God calls us, His Spirit will lift us up, take us where we need to go, and give us the words we need to say.

REFLECT

What might God be leading you to say and do today?

JIM EDLIN

October
29

THE GOD WHO HOLDS US ACCOUNTABLE

God judges each individual life fairly.

THE WORD

**EZEKIEL
18:1-4**

The word of the **Lord** came to me: ²“What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: “The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”?

³“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign **Lord**, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.

21-32

²¹“But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die. ²²None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them. Because of the righteous things they have done, they will live. ²³Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign **Lord**. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

²⁴“But if a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will they live? None of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die.

²⁵“Yet you say, ‘The way of the **Lord** is not just.’ Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? ²⁶If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin, they will die for it; because of the sin they have committed they will die. ²⁷But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and does what is just and right, they will save their

life. ²⁸Because they consider all the offenses they have committed and turn away from them, that person will surely live; they will not die. ²⁹Yet the Israelites say, ‘The way of the **Lord** is not just.’ Are my ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

KEY VERSES ³⁰“Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign **Lord**. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. ³¹**Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? ³²For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign **Lord**. Repent and live!**

ENGAGE THE WORD

God does not allow His people to wallow in the pit of self-pity. Like a good parent, God maintains tough love and holds His people accountable for their thoughts and actions. He lovingly challenges them to be responsible for themselves. He will not allow them to blame others, believe a lie, or remain the same.

GOD WILL NOT LET US BLAME OTHERS

Ezekiel 18:1-4

People in Ezekiel’s community had been dealt a bad hand. They had been wrenched from their homeland, stripped of their possessions, humiliatingly marched hundreds of miles to a strange land, placed in make-shift refugee camps, and forced to work on projects for their victors. All of this because of their ancestors’ poor decisions. Kings, priests, prophets and people alike had ignored God and their descendants suffered in exile because of that. So, a popular proverb seemed to fit perfectly, “the parents eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (v. 2).

That proverb did not tell the whole story however. The rest of the story was that those in exile had also contributed to their circumstances. The proverb expresses the truth that decisions in each generation impact the next generation. However, it is also true that “everyone (literally “each soul”) belongs” to God (v. 4). God responds to every person individually.

Did You Know?

Like many eastern cultures, ancient Israelites stressed the importance of the group over the individual. No person was an island unto themselves because people survived and thrived together, not as individuals.

GOD WILL NOT LET US BELIEVE A LIE

Whether parent or child, leader, or follower, each one stands accountable for their own actions before God. People can make decisions apart from the group. No one is completely trapped by the path that others choose.

So, the adversities of life in exile could not all be laid at someone else's feet, as convenient as that might be. A measure of responsibility needed to be acknowledged by those who accused their parents and politicians. They needed to see the shortcomings in themselves as clearly as they saw them in others.

Ezekiel 18:21-29

The unwillingness of Ezekiel's neighbors to accept responsibility for their actions led them to believe a lie. This is not just any lie. It is the greatest lie of all time. It is the one that Satan got Eve to believe in the garden. It is the lie that God cannot be trusted. Ezekiel's audience claimed, "The way of the LORD is not just" (v. 25). They reasoned that they were suffering the hardships of exile by no fault of their own. Thus, God had unfairly punished them for something they did not do. Essentially, they believed that God could not be trusted to get things right.

God's message through Ezekiel, however, clarified that "a wicked person" could turn away from sin and "live," even in a refugee camp (v. 21). They could choose life rather than death right there in their present circumstances. They could decide to live according to God's plan and find real life. Ezekiel described this kind of living in previous verses (18:15-17). It included remaining faithful to God and looking out for the best interest of other people. In other words, the prophet gave examples of how one might keep the Ten Commandments. This is the sort of life that "pleased" God and could energize His followers (v. 23).

Unfortunately, people can also turn away from God's way. They can choose to ignore the Lord and His plan for treating others well. As a result, according

Think About It

The word translated “offenses” in the NIV means trespasses or transgressions; that is, going where one is not supposed to go. It emphasizes the people’s intentional rebellion against the ways of God.

GOD WILL NOT LEAVE US THE SAME

to Ezekiel, these people “will die” (v. 26). Though their lungs may continue to breathe air each day, they will only exist and not experience the abundant life God desires for them. They will feel like they are in the grave long before they enter it.

Ezekiel 18:30-32

The people to whom Ezekiel preached were not willing to accept responsibility for their sins or believe the truth about God. Yet, God still believed they could change. So, He urged them to “repent” and “turn away from all their offenses” (v. 30). He challenged them to “get a new heart and a new spirit” (v. 31). They needed to stop blaming others and believing a lie. They needed to get a heart like God’s that takes “no pleasure in the death of anyone” (v. 32).

The trajectory of life can change when the hearts of people change. Outward circumstances may not be altered. But a person can move more toward life than death if they choose to follow God’s design for them. Being fully alive does not depend upon one’s situation, whether it is positive or negative. Real life derives from the Bread of Life who said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

For Ezekiel’s audience, life in exile seemed hopeless. But thankfully God would not let them blame others, believe a lie, or remain the same. Through Ezekiel God urged them to control what they could; that is, their commitment to Him and His way of life. They could choose to trust God and live godly lives regardless of their circumstances. This decision would make all the difference for people living in exile. It will make all the difference for us today as well.

REFLECT

Invite God to do a heart checkup in your life today.

JIM EDLIN

November

5

THE GOD WHO IS OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

God will protect and care for people even when their leaders do not.

THE WORD

**EZEKIEL
34:1-16**

The word of the **Lord** came to me: ²“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign **Lord** says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ³You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. ⁴You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

⁷“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ⁸As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign **Lord**, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, ⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the **Lord**: ¹⁰This is what the Sovereign **Lord** says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

KEY VERSES

11“**For this is what the Sovereign **Lord** says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹²As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after**

my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Chapter 34 begins a portrait of renewal by dealing with one of the main problems that led to exile. It was Israel's leadership. Since everything begins at the top, Israel's catastrophic failure could be traced to the character of her kings, administrators, priests, and prophets. God's message through Ezekiel in this chapter exposed the pattern and product of poor leaders in Israel's history. But then God offers hope in the promise of a new kind of leader.

THE PATTERN OF POOR LEADERS

Ezekiel 34:1-4

Throughout the ancient world the role of leaders was often described as that of a shepherd. Though not necessarily a coveted profession, the skills of a good shepherd paralleled those of a good leader. Good shepherds diligently looked after their sheep, providing them food and water, tending to their injuries, and protecting them from dangers.

According to the Lord, Israel's leaders had not acted like good shepherds at all. They had acted like selfish shepherds who exploited their flock's products of "curds" and "wool" for their own personal use (v. 3). Like foolish shepherds they even slaughtered "the choice animals" that should have been used for breeding (v. 3). Like careless shepherds they had not

Did You Know?

In this message, God called Israel “my sheep” five times and “my flock” 10 times, which indicates a deep sense of personal connection with Israel. They were not just any group of people to God.

THE PRODUCT OF POOR LEADERS

“bound up the injured,” nor even “searched for the lost” (v. 4). They had taken rather than given to the people of Israel. They had weakened rather than strengthened them.

Sometimes leaders can focus more on their privilege than their responsibility. They can ignore their God-ordained role of shepherding the people they lead. When they do, God is displeased and eventually calls them to account, as He did Israel’s leaders.

Ezekiel 34:5-10

Israel’s poor leadership caused a national disaster. In terms of shepherding, the people of Israel “were scattered” like lost sheep with “no shepherd” (v. 5). They “wandered over all the mountains” where they became vulnerable to predators (v. 6). In fact, they had “been plundered” and “become food for all the wild animals” (v. 8).

As the Bible vividly describes, the Babylonians brutally destroyed the nation of Judah and scattered its inhabitants. They captured its king, murdered his sons, and leveled the city of Jerusalem. They plundered everything of value in the temple and left it a smoldering heap. They rounded up those who survived the slaughter and marched them off to Babylon in chains (see 2 Kings 25).

All this happened because of the poor leadership of Israel’s ungodly kings, selfish administrators, misguided priests, and false prophets. They had been the primary cause of the suffering of thousands. Even more significantly, God was “against the shepherds” and would “hold them accountable” for this disaster (v. 10). God removed them from their positions and would not allow them to prey on people any longer (v. 10). The perks of leadership were gone. No more status. No more privileges. Only God’s disapproval. When God deems it necessary “he brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing” (Isaiah 40:23).

Think About It

The Bible regularly portrays God as a good shepherd. In Isaiah 40:11, God “gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart,” and in Psalm 23 He supplies all the needs of His sheep.

Ezekiel 34:11-16

The good news of this message is not just that God took out the poor leaders. God also planned to restore His people by being the ideal leader, a good shepherd, to them. God’s leadership would be unlike what they had experienced before. In fact, it would be the exact opposite. God would truly care. He would “search” for lost sheep and “rescue them” (vv. 11-12). God would bring them back to their homeland and “tend them in a good pasture” where they could “lie down” in safety (vv. 13-15). He would treat them as if they belonged to Him because He called them His “sheep” (vv. 11, 12, 15).

In the years following exile God did return His people to their homeland. According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, they once again rebuilt the temple and the city of Jerusalem. For centuries these stood as a witness to God’s benevolent shepherding of His people.

This beautiful picture of God as a good shepherd helps us understand why Jesus called himself “the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Jesus cared so much for His sheep that He lay down His life for them. In this way He demonstrated how the Good Shepherd of Ezekiel’s prophecy would ultimately rescue His people.

Though we may experience poor leaders in our world at times, we can look beyond them to the One who truly is a good shepherd. We can be sure that God leads each of our lives with genuine concern. For, according to Psalm 100:4, “We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.”

REFLECT

Take time to thank God for the ways He is the Good Shepherd in your life.

JIM EDLIN

November

12

THE GOD WHO TRANSFORMS OUR HEARTS

God desires to change people from the inside out.

THE WORD

**EZEKIEL
36:22-36**

Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign **LORD** says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.²³ I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the **LORD**, declares the Sovereign **LORD**, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

²⁴“For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.²⁶ **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.**²⁷ **And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.**²⁸ Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.²⁹ I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you.³⁰ I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine.³¹ Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices.³² I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign **LORD**. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel!

³³“This is what the Sovereign **LORD** says: On the day I cleanse

you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt.³⁴ The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it.³⁵ They will say, “This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.”³⁶ Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.’

ENGAGE THE WORD

God has a purpose for everything He does. Even seemingly senseless catastrophes can accomplish God's goal for people. That goal is the transformation of the human heart, from a self-absorbed to a God-sensitive soul. In Ezekiel 36, the Lord explains the breadth of this transformation. He also describes the way transformation takes place and the amazing results of it in the lives of people.

THE BREADTH OF GOD'S TRANSFORMATION

Ezekiel 36:22-23

Through the devastating destruction of Judah in 586 BC, God sought to change the hearts of Abraham's descendants. The main reason the Lord wanted to do this was not only because of what it might do for Israel though. God wanted to change the world.

Israel's rebellion against the Lord's sovereignty had sent the wrong message. It caused the Lord's name to be “profaned among the nations” (v. 23). He became viewed as just another man-made deity like the ones that other nations worshiped. Few people saw any benefit in serving the God of Israel because of what they saw in His people. Sin in the community of faith had made the Lord look bad.

Our world desperately needs to know who the Lord truly is. His “holy name” must be proclaimed so that people can comprehend His unique and incomparable character (v. 22). There is no one like God in the entire universe. He is the only source of salvation and real life for the people of this world.

Think About It

The phrase “they will know I am the Lord” is repeated throughout Ezekiel over 30 times. The Hebrew word translated “know” conveys the idea of personally experiencing God, not just knowing about God.

THE WAY OF TRANSFORMATION

So, God sought to transform Israel in order that “the nations will know that I am the Lord” (v 23). God had broader concerns than just Israel. Their transformation brought hope that others might truly experience a relationship with the Lord as well.

Ezekiel 36:24-27

Ezekiel’s message lays out the process God planned for transforming His people. It would begin when the Lord took them “out of the nations” and brought them “back into their own land” (v. 24). The sinful ways of the world must be left behind.

God’s people needed to separate themselves from the corrupting influences around them and return to the place God designed for them to live. Then the Lord would “cleanse” them (v. 25). Priests used this term to speak of actions that prepared them to enter God’s presence in the temple. Fully aware of God’s awesome holiness, Israel’s priests regularly washed their hands, changed clothes, and abstained from things so that they might be acceptable in God’s sight. In order to be transformed, God’s people needed to be cleansed, like priests, of “impurities” and “idols” (v. 25). Such things indicated that the Lord did not have first place in their lives. Therefore, they stood in the way of a close relationship with God.

At this point God would do what only God can do. He would give them a “new heart and put a new spirit” in them (v 26). They would be changed from the inside out. The Lord would accomplish this by putting His “Spirit” in them that would “move” them to live as He intended (v. 27). This was God’s enabling Spirit at work within people. They were not forced to follow God, but rather empowered to do so. Holy living became possible because of the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost Jesus’ disciples experienced the fulfilling of Ezekiel’s prophecy. In Acts 2 we read how God transformed the hearts of the disciples by His Spirit. He enabled them to become bold witness-

Did You Know?

Transformed hearts lead to transformed lives, which in turn lead to a transformed world. It all begins with God's transformation of an individual heart.

THE RESULTS OF TRANSFORMATION

es "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). These transformed disciples eventually transformed the world in which they lived.

Ezekiel 36:28-36

A changed heart changes all of life. In God's message through Ezekiel, we can see three things that resulted from Israel's transformed hearts: a renewed relationship with God, a rebuilding of things lost, and a reestablishment of their witness to the world.

God promised the renewal of that intimate covenantal relationship in which people felt they belonged. God would once again call them "my people" and they would know the Lord as their God (v. 28). Along with this, people would regain things lost in the past life of sin. They would experience blessings upon "the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field" once more (v. 30). Abandoned towns would be resettled and "ruins ... rebuilt" (v. 33). They would rebuild life in the promised land until it began to look like what God had originally designed for them. It would be "like the garden of Eden" where God and humans first experienced intimate fellowship (v. 35).

These blessings upon God's people would indicate that God's goodness rested upon them. They would be signs of spiritual blessings that would cause the nations to take notice. People would begin to see the kind of life that only the Lord can give. As a result, Israel would be a witness to the world of who the Lord truly is: a gracious God. Transformed people reflecting their transforming God is attractive. It invites people of the world into something very different than they experience otherwise.

REFLECT

Consider the ways you can open yourself up to the transformational work of the Holy Spirit today.

JIM EDLIN

November

19

THE GOD WHO IS THE SPIRIT OF NEW LIFE

God's Spirit infuses life into the lifeless.

THE WORD

**EZEKIEL
37:1-14**

The hand of the **Lord** was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the **Lord** and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign **Lord**, you alone know.”

⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the **Lord**! ⁵This is what the Sovereign **Lord** says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. **I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the **Lord**.**’”

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign **Lord** says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign **Lord** says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.’

¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the **Lord**, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the **Lord**.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

LIFE WITHOUT GOD'S SPIRIT

In Ezekiel 37, the Lord gives Ezekiel a vision of his Spirit breathing new life into His people. It begins with an image of what life looks like without God's Spirit. Then it describes how new life comes from the Spirit and what it might look like when one lives in the Spirit.

Ezekiel 37:1-3

God gave Ezekiel a striking image of what human life is like without the Spirit of God. He took the prophet to a battlefield filled with the remains of fallen soldiers. A victorious army had stripped the bodies and left them to wild animals and the elements. Only “very dry” lifeless sun-scorched bones remained (v. 2). These unburied bones announced shame as well as defeat. No one had been able or cared enough to honor these fallen soldiers in death and place them in a grave.

This was a scene that Ezekiel’s audience knew all too well. Efficient Babylonian armies had scattered the landscape of the ancient Middle East with such battlefields. They were monuments to human vice and greed as well as portraits of hopelessness for those defeated. They reflected the despair that those living under Babylonian power must have felt.

This scene also pictures life for some people today. Without God in their lives, people feel an emptiness that makes life appear hopeless. Even Christians, though the Holy Spirit dwells in them, can relate to the dry bones at times. Their walk with God becomes more of a routine than an adventure often because they have not surrendered fully to the Spirit's control.

God's question to the prophet seems almost point-

Did You Know?

The Hebrew word for “bones” (*edzem*) is related to the word for “strength” (*adzam*). Thus, the phrase “our bones are dried up” would sound similar to “our strength is dried up.”

LIFE FROM GOD'S SPIRIT

less. Of course, sun-scorched bones cannot live again. But Ezekiel knew that life is never hopeless with God. He realized that even the driest of bones, the most lifeless, could come to life if God so ordained it. His God was the “Sovereign Lord,” the original source and continuous sustainer of all life (v. 3). With the Creator all things are possible, even new life from dry bones.

Ezekiel 37:4-10

God commanded Ezekiel to speak to the bones. Obediently the prophet preached as if the bones could hear him, and they did. While the prophet prophesied “the bones came together” (v. 7). Then, “tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them” (v. 8). Miraculously human bodies took form. But their human appearance did not mean they were alive. “There was no breath in them” (v. 8). They needed the breath of God to come alive, just as the first human did at creation. Once God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” the human “became a living being” (Genesis 2:9).

The Hebrew word for “breath” (*ruach*) is the same word translated “Spirit” and “winds” in these verses and throughout the Old Testament. It can convey the idea of the Spirit of God as well as human breath and air moving over the earth. It is the divine life force that animates our world. As Ezekiel’s message underscores, human life derives from the breath of God. When God’s Spirit entered the bodies of flesh and bones, “they came to life” (v. 10).

Those who feel dead and hopeless look for new life in many places. They may pursue relationships, drugs, or any number of things. Even Christians who feel like they are just going through the motions might seek after some new insight to enliven their daily walk with God. But only God can give life to the dead and dying. Only the Originator and Sustainer of human life can breathe new life into a human being. There is no other source.

Think About It

God used the words Ezekiel spoke to infuse new life and hope into Israel. God often uses preaching as an instrument by which His Spirit awakens and enlivens His people.

LIFE IN GOD'S SPIRIT

Ezekiel 37:11-14

Ezekiel's message ends by applying the vision to "the people of Israel" (v. 11). Their exile to Babylon had left them like lifeless dry bones. They felt abandoned by God, "cut off" from the ancient promises to Abraham and his descendants (v. 11). They had little hope of ever returning to their homeland and regaining God's blessings there.

But God's Spirit offered hope to Israel. God planned to resurrect His people to new life. He declared that He would "open your graves and bring you up from them" (v. 13). God wanted to do something that few dreamed possible. He would restore life to Israel, place them in their homeland, and enliven them with His Spirit once again. Israel would no longer be the walking dead. They would be walking in the Spirit.

As a result, Israel would truly "know" the Lord, having personally experienced God for themselves (v. 14). Theirs would not be only a head-knowledge of God, but also a heart-knowledge. They would know firsthand that God had actually "spoken" and acted in this world through His Spirit at work in their lives (v. 15).

This was God's plan for ancient Israel. It is also God's plan for people today. God wants to impart His Spirit to those who are far from Him and awaken them to new life. God also wants to fill believers with His Spirit so that they come fully alive to His presence. God longs for Christians to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" just like the New Testament disciples (Acts 4:31). He desires that His people "may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

REFLECT Breathe a prayer of thanks to God for His life-giving power.

JIM EDLIN

November
26

THE GOD WHO HOLDS THE FUTURE

God is the God of the future.

THE WORD

EZEKIEL

43:1-7

KEY VERSE

Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, ²and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. ³The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. ⁴The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east. ⁵Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.

⁶While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. ⁷He said: “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name—neither they nor their kings—by their prostitution and the funeral offerings for their kings at their death.

EZEKIEL

47:1-10

¹The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. ²He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side.

³As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. ⁴He measured off another thousand cubits and

led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist.⁵ He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross.⁶ He asked me, “Son of man, do you see this?”

Then he led me back to the bank of the river.⁷ When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river.⁸ He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh.⁹ Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.¹⁰ Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The final nine chapters of Ezekiel describe one more vision of the prophet. This time God gave Ezekiel a glimpse of a future ideal temple and worshiping community, things which resonated deeply with a priest like Ezekiel. This vision pictures a future in which God comes home, pours out His grace, and heals His people.

WHEN GOD COMES HOME

Ezekiel 43:1-7

In the previous three chapters, God's ideal home on earth is described in great detail. This home is the temple in Jerusalem, which is more often called a “house” (*bayit*) rather than a “temple” (*hekal*) in these chapters. It is a well-fortified, secure dwelling with strong gates, high walls, and broad spaces for worshipers to encounter God. Its architecture communicated a sense of awe for God's awesome and unique character. Those who worship there could sense that the Lord is not like any other deity.

When Ezekiel arrived at the temple's eastern gate,

Did You Know?

Throughout this vision, someone who looked human ("the man") guided Ezekiel from place to place. Actually, it was a heavenly being "whose appearance was like bronze" according to Ezekiel 40:3.

he "saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east" (v. 2). Earlier in the book the presence of the Lord departed from the temple because of the extreme corruption of the priests and people (11:23). This all happened before the temple's destruction and paved the way for that catastrophic event in 586 BC. God left His home on earth when He was not welcome. When people treated God like every other man-made deity, God did not stick around.

But in the future God promised to return. Ezekiel's vision portrayed the glory of the Lord, the awesome presence of God Almighty, coming home again. With the same images of earlier visions, Ezekiel saw an entourage of surreal creatures carrying the throne of God back to the temple. The Lord once again would come to dwell in the midst of His people.

WHEN GOD POURS OUT HIS GRACE

Ezekiel 47:1-6

As the glory of God filled the temple, water began to flow back out its doorway down into the valley. Even the magnificent ideal temple in Jerusalem could not hold the splendor and beauty of the Lord. This river of water gives us a picture of the grace of God, because the longer it flowed the larger it became. Remarkably, at each sounding the river grew deeper and wider until it was "a river that no one could cross" (v. 5). Like God's grace, it is greater than we ever imagined. It touches those we never thought could be touched. It covers what we never believed could be covered. It washes what we never dreamed could be washed.

If we think God has been gracious to His people in the past, wait till the end of time. His grace will pour forth like a never-ending, ever-widening, always-deepening river. God has more grace in store for this world than we ever thought possible. If we are looking for a "big bang," here it is at the end of time and the beginning of the new age. It is an explosion of God's goodness.

We should notice that God's grace flows from God's

Think About It

The Hebrew word for “glory” essentially means weighty or heavy. In reference to God, it connotes a palpable sense of divine presence, a feeling that one could actually touch or even see God.

WHEN GOD HEALS HIS PEOPLE

holy place. Though the temple possessed walls to preserve the Lord’s holy character, a river of God’s grace flowed from it. Holiness is about rivers as much as it is about walls. God’s people, who are called to be holy as He is holy, must separate themselves from the impurities of this world. But at the same time, they must graciously pour themselves into it.

Ezekiel 47:6b-10

The river of God’s grace flowed eastward through very arid land to one of the most lifeless places on earth. The Dead Sea is named for a reason. It does not support marine or plant life because of its high mineral content. Yet, as the water from the temple flowed new life sprang up “on each side of the river” (v. 7). When it entered the Dead Sea its waters became “fresh” (v. 8). Literally, the water “was healed.” Just like at creation, “swarms of living creatures” filled the waters of the once Dead Sea (v. 9).

The message of the vision is clear: God’s grace heals everything it touches. It generates new life, cultivates growth, and restores hope. Wherever the river of God’s grace flows, “everything will live” (v 9). It is God’s amazing gift to this world.

This vision speaks about the future, but also about the present. God comes into the midst of His people today, pouring out His grace and healing them. Today we can live in that ever-deepening stream of God’s goodness. As we await the final consummation of human history, we can trust in God’s healing presence among us today.

REFLECT

Commit, or recommit, your present, as well as your future, to God today.

JIM EDLIN

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Fall 2023:

2 Chronicles 33:12-13

Ezekiel 34:11-12

Ezekiel 36:26-27

COMING NEXT QUARTER

Winter 2023-24

Unit 1: A Savior is Born (Luke)

Celebrate the birth of Jesus by contemplating on the extraordinary stories leading up to the Messiah's coming, culminating in the Savior's entering the world as a baby in a manger.

Unit 2: The Parables of Jesus in Luke

Jesus used simple, but relatable stories to teach important spiritual lessons for our daily lives. This unit looks at many of the parables Jesus taught from the book of Luke.



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