

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week One: The Appearance Of The Likeness Of The Glory Of God (Ezekiel 1)**

*Ezekiel, like Daniel, wrote and prophesied from exile in Babylon. His visions often speak of the reasons for Jerusalem's impending fall, yet they also promise spiritual renewal and restoration. The book of Ezekiel contains many vivid images that call us to look beyond appearances, and let our God tell us of his ways and his truths.*

#### ***Among The Exiles (Ezekiel 1:1-3)***

Ezekiel describes his first prophecy as the heavens being opened, to give him visions of God. This took place when he was in Babylon, among a group of Judean exiles. The elaborate vision that follows lifts Ezekiel's eyes to heaven, to help him realize at once that what God is doing and saying goes beyond what physical eyes can see.

God began to give Ezekiel his prophetic visions of spiritual realities when the prophet was one of a group of exiles from Judah (1:1). Heavens were opened for him to see these signs, just as John saw a door into heaven opened (Revelation 4:1). For us too, God has opened his heavens for us, to give us a glimpse of the imperishable things above.

Ezekiel's first vision came in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile, as the kingdom of Judah was just a few steps from falling (1:2-3). Ezekiel was taken as part of the second group of captives taken as exiles to Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-17, about 597 BC). In Nebuchadnezzar's first raid on Jerusalem (about 606 BC), this first group of exiles had included Daniel (Daniel 1:1-7). Not long after Ezekiel's first vision, Judah and Jerusalem would fall (about 586 BC).

#### ***A Heavenly Windstorm (Ezekiel 1:4-21)***

The prophet now sees a windstorm, full of images that cannot be described by mere human words. Many of these images are also seen in Revelation, and as in the book of Revelation, they tell us of God's nature. They are meant to be seen by 'the eyes of our hearts,' instead of trying to get a picture of what they look like to physical eyes.

This windstorm gives Ezekiel glimpses of spiritual reality (1:4-14). The first things he sees are lightning, light, and fire, images of God's holiness and majesty (Psalm 97:1-4). Ezekiel's first vision gave him an unforgettable impression of who our God is. As God did for Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-4), he gives the prophet a clear sense that God's nature and the spiritual realms above are far vaster than human minds can fully grasp.

Now appear the 'four living creatures' whom we see later in Revelation (Revelation 4:6b-8). The description mixes numerous images to suggest the life that God gives, and their closeness with God. Like fire moving back and forth, speeding like lightning, they are drawn to God (Revelation 4:9-11).

Then Ezekiel sees wheels intersecting wheels associated with the living creatures, sparkling and moving with the creatures (1:15-21). These wheels are full of eyes, for life is in them too, with the eyes reminding us of God's watchful presence and his desire to cleanse us (Zechariah 3:9). Moving as one, the spirit of the living creatures is within them. They accompany God's presence, and in a sense they are bringing his presence to proclaim his words (Psalm 18:9-10).

### ***A Figure Glowing With Brilliant Light (Ezekiel 1:22-28)***

Now Ezekiel sees and hears further sounds and sights of God's presence. Some of these images can be seen in Genesis, and some can be seen in Revelation. God's nature has always been the same, and as intimidating these visions may seem, they also reassure us that God will always be the same God, full of holiness and compassion, full of truth and grace.

Above the creatures (1:22-24), the prophet sees something like a 'vault' (or 'expanse', or 'firmament', Genesis 1:6-8), and sparkling like pure crystal. The sound of the creatures' wings now becomes intense, making a sound like rushing waters, the sound we hear often in Revelation (Revelation 1:15) that reminds us of the water of life that flows from God's presence.

Then, above the 'vault' Ezekiel sees a throne looking like lapis lazuli with a fiery figure seated on it (1:25-28). Again we see the fire of God's holiness, this time glowing metal, and surrounded with brilliant light, as if he were coming on the clouds (Psalm 104:2-4).

The radiance around the figure reminds Ezekiel of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day (Genesis 9:13-16), a comforting image after the rains, and a reminder of God's promises to us. And all of these vivid images are only a small foretaste of our God's full majesty and holiness and his light and his true glory. They are just the appearance of the likeness of his glory.

Amidst the troubling times ahead, these images would give Ezekiel a sense of what was real and imperishable, and reassured him of God's promises to bring spiritual renewal and restoration.

God promises us too, that he can inwardly renew us and that his everlasting compassion will never fail (Isaiah 54:7-12). Like the days of Noah, when after he had to turn his face away for a brief moment, his covenant of peace will never be shaken. God is our living hope who can give us the spiritual blessings that can rebuild the spiritual ruins in our hearts and can give rest to our anxious spirits.

*- Mark Garner, July 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Two: God Gives Us His Words (Ezekiel 2-3)**

*After seeing the extraordinary vision of the creatures and the wheels, God now speaks to Ezekiel about the message he is to proclaim, and about the problems he will face with the exiles. The prophet would face many difficult times, so God gives him many reassurances that his presence will be with him in the times ahead. These can reassure us today too.*

#### ***Whether They Listen Or Fail To Listen (Ezekiel 2)***

God now lifts Ezekiel to his feet, and begins to tell him about the Judean exiles. He assures the prophet that his responsibility is only to speak the truth, whether they listen or fail to listen. Moreover, God will put his words in the prophet's mouth, and reminds him simply to accept them and to proclaim them.

God understands that he is calling Ezekiel to face an obstinate and stubborn people (2:1-7). He repeatedly refers to them as rebellious, because their hearts have become hardened to the point of rebelling against anything. So after Ezekiel was overwhelmed by the vision, God raises him up and helps the prophet sense the Spirit coming into him (John 20:21-22).

Also, as he will frequently remind him, just to say the words God has given him, whether the people listen or not, so they will know a prophet has been among them, for they have heard the truths of God (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). God's presence will be with him as he walks the path ahead, for it will be a path full of briars and thorns and scorpions (Deuteronomy 8:15).

God calls us too, just to listen to his voice, just accept his words because they tell us what is best for us (2:8-10). We cannot find God's truths by our own knowledge, so all we need to do is open our mouths, and he will fill them (Psalm 81:10-14). He feeds us with a 'scroll full of words' that may be hard to grasp, so he reminds us just to take them to heart.

#### ***The Prophet Eats The Scroll (Ezekiel 3:1-15)***

Even as God continues to describe the difficulties Ezekiel will face, he also gives him more reminders that he will be near. Whether or not the people listen, the prophet will be content with God's words. God will enable him to continue through the resistance and opposition Ezekiel will face, and he helps the prophet sense that God's hand is upon him.

As the prophet eats God's words, they taste as sweet as honey, just as God's truths can satisfy the spirits of those who seek him for his own sake (3:1-3). The prophet's 'stomach' is now full of God's words (Revelation 10:9-10), and although they may sometimes be uncomfortable to the flesh, they are words of truth that bring the life that endures (John 6:51).

God uses the image of making our foreheads like the hardest stone (3:4-11). While he makes our hearts soft and our spirits sensitive, he can make our foreheads like flint; so that even as we bear spiritual sorrows and fears, we will not turn away from God's path (Isaiah 50:5-7).

Then we hear a rumbling as the glory of the Lord as he rises (3:12-15), as Ezekiel hears the entrancing sound of wings, a vivid image of life and of things above. God keeps reassuring us too that his presence is near, not with tangible things but with images of imperishable things (Revelation 4:5-8).

### ***Further Reassurance For The Difficult Times (Ezekiel 3:16-27)***

In the image of the watchman, God again reassures Ezekiel that he is called simply to proclaim the words God will give him. God realizes that the path ahead will be hard for the prophet, so he helps Ezekiel understand the reasons for the message to be proclaimed. He also promises the prophet that, although he will face significant resistance, God will open his mouth.

God's image of making Ezekiel a watchman for the people (3:16-21) is often misunderstood as a warning; yet it is a reassurance. His call to the watchman is simply to proclaim the truths God enables him to see (Isaiah 21:6-9), to warn about spiritual perils and to help others to see their hope above. His call is not to threaten us with punishment, rather to be a living covenant for the people, helping the blind see the true light and release from the world's chains (Isaiah 42:6-9).

This world's futility and darkness can bind Ezekiel's bodies and ours too with ropes, and even though our tongues may seem to stick to the roofs of our mouths, God can open our mouths when he gives us his words (3:22-27).

Throughout the book, God encourages Ezekiel with reminders that his hand is near and his glory is above (for example, Ezekiel 1:1, 3:15, 10:20-22, 43:3). They can bind him, harm him, put him in chains, but the world's chains and its emptiness cannot bind God's words (2 Timothy 2:8-9). Jesus brought the true light into this world, and the darkness cannot overcome it (John 1:5).

God does not judge by appearances nor by outward results; his call has always been to worship him with our hearts (Isaiah 29:11-24). It is human nature to get things upside-down, and so God astounds our human minds with wonders of truth and grace. For he has made a spectacle of this world's wisdom, triumphing over it by the cross.

God's patient call is to recognize his voice, take his words to heart, and acknowledge that he alone is our living God, for he can open the eyes of the blind and teach those who are wayward in spirit.

*- Mark Garner, August 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Three: They Will Know That I Am The Lord (Ezekiel 4-7)**

*God now calls Ezekiel to do some strange things, and to proclaim some ominous prophecies about the coming fall of Jerusalem. These fearful images speak beyond the facts of what is to come, for they show us God's sadness in letting this happen. Yes, even in these gloomy words, we can see God's holiness and his desire to cleanse his people and draw them near.*

#### ***God Bears Our Spiritual Burdens (Ezekiel 4)***

The prophet's peculiar actions help us to understand God's perspectives on the fall and exile of Judah. As God's watchman for the people, Ezekiel not only announces what he sees and hears, for he also experiences it. God bears the burdens of human sin and emptiness and lostness, as we see especially in the cross of Jesus.

God tells Ezekiel to make a city in clay, to engrave a likeness of Jerusalem and then to build siege works and battering rams around it (4:1-3). The prophet himself must act out the role of besieger, to besiege it as a sign to his fellow exiles and to those still in Jerusalem. His people have turned his face against them, so he calls them once again to trust in him, for their times and their souls are in his hands (Luke 12:4-7)

Next, the prophet is called to lie down on his side for two long periods, to illustrate the burdens God has carried so long for Israel and Judah in their straying (4:4-8). Their idolatry and hardness of heart have bound God's arms as with ropes, as he patiently reached out to them (Isaiah 59:1-2). Ezekiel experiences the burdens God carries, and this also helps us understand what Jesus bore on the cross for our sake (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Ezekiel also depicts the human side of what their uncleanness has brought, with the images of God cutting off the food supply (4:9-17). Because they have lost interest in the spiritual food God wants to give them, they are eating defiled food (Proverbs 23:1-3). Spiritual food and water are already scarce, because nothing in this world can ever satisfy our spirits (Haggai 1:5-6).

#### ***The Image Of Three Thirds (Overview Of Ezekiel 5-6)***

Next, God calls Ezekiel to perform another odd action, shaving his head and his beard, and then disposing of the hairs in various ways. These images foretell the fate of Judah when God's presence will no longer be with them, yet they also have deeper meaning for us. Those who wander from God's paths face spiritual famine and danger.

After shaving himself, the prophet collects the shavings and scatters them (5:1-12). Some who stray too far from God face spiritual famine, others to the arrows of the accuser, or others simply wander off, blown by the winds farther from God's side, a caution for us of the spiritual perils of not listening to God's words (Hebrews 2:1-4).

Then God says his wrath will subside (5:13-17). He does not punish for punishment's sake; he disciplines those he cares for only to remind us that we need him, that he tells us what is good for

our spirits. He has spent his compassionate wrath, as Revelation tells us, his plagues are completed (Revelation 15:1).

In calling Ezekiel to prophesy against the mountains and the valleys, God is speaking of cleansing the land (6:1-7). God fulfilled this desire in reconciling all things to himself in the blood of Jesus on his cross (Colossians 1:19-20).

Even in the calamities of Judah's fall and the exile, some will remember God (6:8-14). He does not threaten for threat's sake, he only cautions them that they might turn their hearts back to him, and refines them so that their eyes might turn back to their God (Psalm 66:10-12).

### *God's Divine Lament (Ezekiel 7)*

This is one of several of God's laments over those who turn their hearts away from him. It speaks of his reluctance to harm them, yet of the need to remind them not to put false hope in worldly things. God does not say these words with hatred nor screaming, rather with mourning and sadness, hoping all the while that they will return to him so they can live with him.

God's lament is also another compassionate warning: See, the day comes (7:1-13). It will be a day when he must treat them as their conduct deserves, instead of with the mercy and pity he always longs to show us. Earthly ways may succeed for a short while, but they only lead to spiritual panic, not the quiet joy of walking with God (Isaiah 28:15-17).

Silver and gold can never deliver us from our real foes, and they cannot meet the deep needs in our hearts and spirits (7:14-22). Only imperishable things can redeem us, only the lifeblood of Jesus' perfect sacrifice can completely cleanse us (1 Peter 1:17-19).

God, our King and our Redeemer, mourns as he laments the suffering of his lost sheep (7:23-27). His Prince of Peace despairs too (Luke 13:34-35), for he lived like one of us and knew all the things we endure. And even as he was brutally nailed to the cross, even as he fully bore our suffering, he had the great hope of forgiving us, since we were sheep without a shepherd who did not even understand what we were doing.

In our distress, God is distressed, and he redeems us in his compassion (Isaiah 63:7-14). As he reminds those who seek him, even as he often did in Deuteronomy, recall the days of old when he redeemed us from the world's emptiness and futile ways, and remember his many kindnesses. In the true glory of his unfailing grace and love, he brought us across waters we could never have crossed, to give our souls rest.

- *Mark Garner, August 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Four: God's Temple & God's Glory (Ezekiel 8-10)**

*These three chapters vividly describe the departure of God's presence from Jerusalem and Judah. These images describe God's sorrow over the idolatry and uncleanness he sees, and his reluctance over what he is about to do. We see the images of God's glory leaving the temple, yet we see his longing to show us grace, and signs of hope.*

#### ***A Look Inside The Temple (Ezekiel 8)***

In this vision, God takes Ezekiel back to Jerusalem, and shows him images of the idolatry and uncleanness that will cause him to withdraw his presence. The temple still looks majestic and impressive on the outside, but God does not judge by appearances, for what is in our hearts is what matters to him, as God patiently often reminds us.

The Spirit takes the prophet to the temple (8:1-6), carrying him by the hair, another image of Ezekiel experiencing the sorrows God endures for his people. He sees a figure glowing with fire, who takes him to see the idolatry that has driven God's presence away from his sanctuary (Isaiah 65:2-3). It is his hardened people, not him, who doesn't want him near.

Then there is a series of images of idolatry within the temple courts (8:7-18). This assortment of idols and practices are not literal; they simply suggest the wide variety of idols that were worshiped then, and the large number of idols that are worshiped today. Both then and now, these idols can never save anyone (Isaiah 57:12-13). So God patiently reminds them to turn their hearts back to him, and take refuge in him (Psalm 61:1-3)

#### ***A Man With A Writing Kit (Ezekiel 9)***

This vision has two contrasting images, a group of men holding weapons, and a man with a writing kit with a special responsibility. As God once more explains the cleansing that Judah needs, he also takes the time to protect those who grieve and lament over the idolatry around them. This image is used much later in Revelation.

The glory of God moves to the threshold, as it readies to depart (9:1-11). Six men with menacing weapons stand poised to strike. In one sense, this depicts the literal fall of Jerusalem when God removed his presence. Yet they also remind us of the spiritual weapons the accuser throws at us, and that will overcome us if God is not near to protect us. And there are a couple of things that need to be done first, signs of hope.

So first, a man clothed with linen, a symbol of cleanness and purity, marks the foreheads of those who lament and grieve over the idols the people are worshiping in their hearts (Revelation 7:1-3).

Then the men with the weapons are told not to touch anyone who has God's mark, his seal, his own name written on their foreheads (Revelation 14:1-3)

Only God can save us from the spiritual snares and traps of the accuser, so we too are called to entrust our spirits into his hands, just as our Jesus did on the cross (Psalm 31:3-5).

### ***God's Glory Leaves The Temple (Ezekiel 10)***

The prophet now sees once again the 'appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord,' the entrancing images he saw by the Kebar River. It is a sad occasion, as now the glory is leaving the temple. Yet we see again God's patience and the grace he wants to give us, so that he can be near us. In Ezekiel 43, we will see God's glory returning.

One more thing needs to be done before the glory leaves, as the fire is entrusted to the man in linen (10:1-8). First, he scatters the coals, a sad image of the fire that has gone out in most of the people's hearts, for they too will be scattered.

Yet he will also carry some of the live fire, to preserve it, to make sure it keeps God's presence hovering near, to preserve hope and light for better times (Leviticus 6:12-13). It will be safe in the hands of the man in linen, because he will not snuff out the smoldering wick (Isaiah 42:3)

So Ezekiel now sees the departure the living creatures he had seen by the Kebar River (10:9-22). He sees again the light, the life, the wings and wheels and eyes (see Ezekiel 1), all the captivating images of who our God is.

Even in this thick darkness, God always wants us to see his glory (Isaiah 60:1-2, 60:19-21), just let him come and walk with us, and let him be our light, the light we could never have found on our own. He wants us to set aside our idols who can never bring meaning or true life, and let him make our hearts a planting of grace that could not have come from us, that only his own hands could have planted.

*- Mark Garner, August 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Five: A New Heart & A New Spirit (Ezekiel 11)**

*The people are putting false hope in restoring the land with their own efforts. So God calls Ezekiel to reiterate his warning about their uncleanness. Yet afterwards he makes his special promise, that though they will be scattered, he will watch over them and will gather them back. He will renew them inwardly, giving them a new heart and a new spirit.*

#### ***Caution Against False Hopes (Ezekiel 11:1-13)***

Even as the fall of Jerusalem approaches, some of the Israelite leaders are advising the people to keep rebuilding the city's buildings, promising that soon they and the city will be rescued. So Ezekiel now cautions the people not to put false hope in this advice, yet even as he does so, Ezekiel laments over what lies ahead.

Since the last Babylonian raid, the people have concentrated on rebuilding, and now they put false hope in reminding each other that their houses have been recently rebuilt (11:1-4). The Israelite leaders are telling the people that the city is the pot, and they are the meat; that is, they think that restoring the physical city is the first step to better times.

Yet just patching up appearances cannot cover the real wounds inside their hearts, and it is only a matter of time before the real needs will be exposed (Luke 5:36). As Jesus often reminds them, it is much more important to clean the inside (Luke 11:39).

So the prophet turns around their saying, telling them they are neither the pot, nor the meat (11:5-13). The idols and uncleanness inside them have 'cooked' spiritual death, so in his faithfulness, God will let them undergo affliction (Psalm 119:75-76). When Ezekiel is anguished over this, God reassures him that he will not completely destroy his remnant (Isaiah 65:8-10).

#### ***God Is Our Sanctuary (Ezekiel 11:14-25)***

The true hope Ezekiel now proclaims is not physical rescue, but rather spiritual rescue. Though they will indeed be scattered among the nations, God will be near them, to be their own 'sanctuary.' Then God makes his special promise, to give them a new heart and a new spirit, a renewal far deeper and better than any physical hope.

God promises the Israelites that he will indeed gather them and bring them back (11:14-17). Even though they may be driven to the ends of the earth, he is our true sanctuary, our refuge, our rock (Psalm 61:2). God always watches over his scattered flock, wherever they go, whether or not they acknowledge him (Psalm 121:5-8). He is always near, so if we seek him with our heart, we will find him (Deuteronomy 4:29-31).

God can remove our hearts of stone, the hardness of self, and replace it with Jesus' softness (11:18-24). We cannot remove the idols from our hearts with our own efforts, yet if our eyes turn back to God, he can remove these idols and give us an undivided heart. Moreover, God gives us his own Holy Spirit to live within us, to guide us and remind us of the truths Jesus teaches us.

As Ezekiel returns to the exiles, he sees the glory of God leaving the city and resting above a mountain, a reminder that the glory of God hovers overhead, waiting for the people to come back to him so he can protect their spirits and souls (Isaiah 31:5).

Only God can cleanse us inwardly, yet all he asks is a contrite heart that understands this and seeks him (Psalm 51). He can create in us a new heart and make our fainting spirits steadfast, to restore our closeness with him. He just asks us to make the living sacrifice of our hearts who love him and want to be near him, a sacrifice God always accepts.

*- Mark Garner, August 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Six: Vines & Sprigs (Overview Of Ezekiel 12-17)**

*In the next several chapters of Ezekiel, we see a variety of images of God's relationship with his people, then and now. These images again remind them of the reasons for the exile, of their need to let God keep them near; and they also give us God's promise of hope. Thus these images tell us today the same message, of our need for God each moment.*

#### ***He Does This To Recapture Their Hearts (Overview of Ezekiel 12-14)***

This series of images describes the false hopes the Judeans have put in their idols and false prophets. First, Ezekiel once more performs unusual actions to make them think. Then his visions remind them, and us, to put our hope in God's ways, not in our own. He reminds us once again that he wants our hearts to turn to him.

Ezekiel re-enacts the exile, packing up his belongings and digging through the wall to dramatize it (Ezekiel 12:1-20). He has to carry around his remaining belongings as a reminder that none of the things we possess or accomplish in this world can ever save us (Isaiah 57:13), a call for us to take refuge in God.

God will fulfill whatever he says (Ezekiel 12:21-28), and he reassures us that he is our Rock; he is our only God, who fulfills what he foretold long ago (Isaiah 44:8). So he also reminds us to listen to the Word of God (Ezekiel 13). He will not fulfill the false promises human minds make, so he cautions us not to follow our own unstable ways (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Then God calls them again to let him remove the idols from their hearts (Ezekiel 14, see also Ezekiel 8). He wants to live among us, and wants to be our God. He asks us to turn our hearts back to him, let him recapture them, so that we can live in his holy presence (Psalm 24:3-4).

#### ***God Will Remember His Covenant (Overview of Ezekiel 15-16)***

The image of the dry vine begins a series of visions about our need for closeness with our God. Just as a vine withers without its roots, our spirits wither away if we aren't rooted in God. Then we see a vision of God's care for us, his compassion for us in our helplessness, and his faithfulness to us in renewing us inwardly.

The description of the "wood of a vine" (Ezekiel 15) simply reminds us of a vine's uselessness when it leaves its roots and dries and withers, for it then lacks any purpose or meaning.

Then, in the vivid images in Ezekiel 16, God found each of us abandoned and helpless, and says, 'Live' (Ezekiel 16). He has given us life in the desert and cares for us (Deuteronomy 32:10-11), though we often forget him and turn our hearts to the world's things (Hosea 13:4-6). Yet he patiently waits for us to turn our eyes back to him, and he renews his covenant with us because his covenant is everlasting (Isaiah 54:10).

### *The Source Of True Life (Ezekiel 17)*

These images remind us that only in God can we find the source of true life. The Scriptures often use plants as images, because they cannot move someplace to seek nourishment. God's call to us is to put our faith in him and in his care, instead of seeking out something else to find meaning and purpose for our lives.

The image of the two eagles and the vine and its roots reminds us of these truths (Ezekiel 17:1-21). God nurtures us with the things our souls really need, and tells us not to look to the 'great eagle' of the world for water. We can find the true life he has called us to, only by remaining rooted in God (Romans 11:17-18).

Though we can seek the outward appearance of strength by putting our trust in this world's wealth and achievements, God can make our spirits flourish inwardly, when we remain in him, like an olive tree in his presence (Psalm 52:7-8).

The vision of planting a tender sprig (Ezekiel 17:22-24) illustrates how God can 'bring down the tall tree' by humbling it, and how he reaches down to make the low tree grow (Psalm 146:6-8). God's call is for us to look beyond this world's appearances, for these cannot show us what his true life is all about.

Jesus also gives us his memorable image of living in the vine (John 15:1-15). His call is reassuring - just remain in him, and he will make our spirits fruitful. As we often read, just listen to his voice, seek him with our heart, and hold fast to him. He will call us his friends, and he will tell us about our God, truths about him that we couldn't have learned on our own.

*- Mark Garner, August 2015*

## THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL

### Notes For Week Seven: Turn To God & Live (Ezekiel 1-2)

*A new series of examples and images now clarifies some of the aspects of God's relationship with us. First, Ezekiel explains some simple truths that are often misunderstood. Then, he proclaims a lament over those who have forsaken their closeness with God. Next, he describes our need to let him refine us, and he reassures us that he wants to keep us near.*

#### **Get a New Heart & a New Spirit (Ezekiel 1)**

It can be hard for human minds to understand God's ways, so Ezekiel carefully explains how God's ways differ from ours. First he reminds us that each of us is responsible for our own thoughts and actions and words, not someone else's - yet God's ways are far deeper than this. He asks us to turn our hearts to him, let him renew us inwardly, and give us life.

Ezekiel quotes a senseless saying that refers to the misconception that we are responsible for someone else's sin (18:1-4). While in this world we often face the consequences of others' sins, he reminds us that each of us belongs to God, who wants each of us to know him (Jeremiah 31:34).

The examples of fathers and sons whose ways differ greatly (18:5-24) are meant to emphasize that each of us is to answer to God, who credits us with righteousness or charges us with wickedness, because salvation can come only from him (Isaiah 45:22-25).

Yet God's ways go even deeper, and his ways are more than just (18:25-32). He knows our hearts, and he always wants to give us life (Deuteronomy 30:1-20), so he always gives us another chance. He never takes pleasure in the death of anyone, asking them to turn to him. For God can give us a new heart (Psalm 51:10-12).

#### **Lament To the Lament (Ezekiel 1)**

Using the princes of Judah as an example, Ezekiel pronounces a lament for those who are not contented with simply walking with their God. Historically, the lament describes the worldly ambitions of the last few kings of Judah and their fate. The lament describes as well the tendency of human nature to seek to become something we weren't meant to be.

In the declining years of Judah, Josiah's successors sought unsuccessfully to protect themselves by seeking alliances with other nations. These are described in 2 Kings 23:31-25:21 and 2 Chronicles 36.

The image of the lioness and the cubs describes our human tendency to pursue worldly ambitions (1-1-1). These lions thought they were strong, and put their trust in this world and in their own strength (Isaiah 31:1). We can indeed succeed in this world's eyes by our own efforts, but these will come at the cost of distancing ourselves from God. Our true hope is not in our strength nor in our wisdom, but rather is in God's unfailing love for us (Psalm 147:8-11).

The next image is of a vine planted near the water (1□10-14), that flourished until it started to depend on itself. It still looked good on the outside, but it forgot the spring of living water, our God who alone can give our spirits true life (Jeremiah 17:13-14).

### ***God's Cleansing □□ □ception (Ezekiel 2□)***

God once more describes how he has cared for them, and how they often turn away from him. Yet he already has in mind the cleansing he will give those who return to him. His cleansing is not punishment for punishment's sake, and his words are not spoken in harshness, rather in patience. He reminds us again that he simply wants to keep us close with him.

Ezekiel describes a familiar cycle: God's faithful care, yet the human tendency to forget our dependence on him (20:1-2□ see also Deuteronomy 32:10-18). We see over and over again our God's patience and his mercy and his compassion for us (Psalm 78:35-40), because no matter how far we stray, he still wants us to come back to him.

We then see God's reminder not to walk in the world's ways, his call not to seek the appearances that this world values (20:30-38). This again is human nature, and God reminds us that at times we will 'pass under his rod,' to go through his compassionate refining (Psalm 66:8-12), to bring us back into his covenant, a place of spiritual abundance (Psalm 65:4)

God always seeks his wandering flock and gathers us back (20:3□4□). He cleanses us from the hardness and idols, and asks us for a sacrifice - the living sacrifice of our hearts (Romans 12:1-2). And he accepts us, graciously calling us fragrant incense (Psalm 6□30-32), because he delights in being our God and having us as 'the sheep of his pasture.'

God can heal the incurable wounds we inflict on our own hearts and spirits (Jeremiah 30:10-22). □o matter how far away we think we may be, he can save us from a distant place. He appeals to us to turn away from the world's false allies, the false hopes of its possessions, accomplishments, pleasures, and fame.

He has done many miracles in our hearts just to draw us near, and his call is simply to devote ourselves to stay close to him, let him be our God and our life.

*- Mark Garner, □eptem□er 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Eight: Images Of God's Cleansing & Refining (Ezekiel 21-25)**

*The next several chapters in Ezekiel contain a series of images of the Israelites' guilt and their need for cleansing. Many of these images are harsh and graphic, in order to communicate God's feelings to their hardened hearts. We shall look at a few selected Scriptures from these chapters, to illustrate the main points that God is making.*

#### ***Images Of Cleansing - Spiritual Parallels (Ezekiel 21-23)***

Each of the images in these chapters holds spiritual parallels for everyone. Even as we read these gloomy visions, we see God's holiness and his faithfulness, because he will do anything he can to keep us from spiritual death. He gently reminds us time after time to seek him with our hearts; and when our hearts become hard, he disciplines us only in the hope we will return.

Ezekiel 21 tells of another attack by the Babylonians, that this time will lead to Jerusalem's fall. Ezekiel 22 details the uncleanness and the hardness of heart in Judah. Ezekiel 23 uses an image we also saw in Ezekiel 16, depicting Israel and Judah as adulterous and defiled.

The call to take off the turban of the high priest and to remove the crown of the prince (21:24-27) would soon take place literally, yet it has a deeper meaning. We have often seen the image of being taken captive as a metaphor for captivity to sin (John 8:34-36). Jesus likewise exalts the lowly by giving them his light, while bringing the exalted low, showing their spiritual blindness (John 9:39).

No crown belongs to any earthly ruler, nor does the turban of a high priest belong to any earthly religious figure, for these belong to Jesus alone, who God has exalted to the highest place for his perfect humility in laying down his life to redeem us (Philippians 2:5-11).

We've also seen the image of refining in the furnace, removing the world's dross and cleansing us from impurity (22:17-29). Just as the land needed cleansing and rain, God along with refining us, he sends the showers of the water of life, to refresh our weary spirits (Psalm 68:7-10)

The people need once again to turn to distinguishing the holy from the common, to distinguish the clean from the unclean (Lev. 10:10). The things the world values highly are unimportant to our God, and the kind of holiness he seeks goes deeper than the appearances. Because of this, he reminds them also not to listen to the false visions of 'prophets' who spoke on their own. As we saw in Ezekiel 11, rescuing them spiritually is more important than rescuing them physically.

God will also refine our hearts so that we will no longer look on the world's unclean things with longing (23:27-28). His hope is not that we depend on our own will power, rather he wants us to let his words come into our hearts so we will 'turn away in disgust' and ask him for the true life that comes from knowing God (Romans 6:21-23).

### ***The Cooking Pot & A Call To Look Beyond Appearances (Ezekiel 24)***

Next Ezekiel returns to the image of the cooking pot, an image the Judeans had devised to give themselves false hope. Instead of the physical rescue they had hoped for, the prophet reminds them that those who turn to God will be rescued spiritually. Then, Ezekiel is again called on to use his own sufferings as an example to the exiles, a reminder to look beyond the appearances.

The image of heaping on the wood and kindling the fire are a vivid image of the complete cleansing that only God can give us (24:10-12). He even burns away the deposits on the empty pot, reminding us that we cannot do this with our own efforts, his call to open our hearts to Jesus and let him cleanse us thoroughly.

Then we see Ezekiel's sorrow as his wife dies (24:15-18). This is neither a punishment to Ezekiel nor to his wife. God knew her death was near, so he encourages Ezekiel to see this as a mercy to her to spare her more suffering (Isaiah 57:1), to grieve quietly in his heart yet not to follow the usual outward pattern of mourning.

So Ezekiel is a sign to the exiles (24:19-24). The appearances they had depended on were about to fall; the temple and the city of Jerusalem would be taken away. They will no longer be able to find false hope in their earthly things nor their own strength nor their own knowledge, rather to put their hope in God's grace and compassion for them, and put their hope in his spiritual salvation (Psalm 33:16-19).

### ***Brought Low To Be Restored (Ezekiel 25)***

Ezekiel now turns to prophecies concerning Judah's neighbors. These nations had either led the Israelites astray with their idolatry, or had turned against them in times of weakness. God brought them low, yet even for them he held out the hope of restoring those who would seek him. We shall look at some Scriptures from Jeremiah to see this.

The Ammonites would be given as plunder (25:6-7), because they were trusting in their riches (Jeremiah 49:4-6). Yet even as God proclaims that they would be 'wiped out,' he also promises through Jeremiah that their spiritual fortunes would be restored. They too will be given the chance to seek God with their heart, no matter where they were scattered (Deuteronomy 30:3-4). No earthly nation is important in itself to God; what matters to our God is each heart.

Likewise, the Moabites will not be remembered (25:10-11), because they defied the Lord (Jeremiah 48:42). Yet their spiritual fortunes will also be restored (Jeremiah 48:46-47), for they too will have the chance to turn to God when they recognize his voice. God's hope for them, and for all those everywhere and in every time, is that they would seek him with their hearts.

God sends abundant spiritual showers to turn the wilderness green, for each of us who seek him with our hearts (Joel 2:21-32). The locusts may eat the world's appearances, but he will replace what they have eaten with far better things like his grace and his truth and his hope and his peace. He gives us a double portion of grace, pouring out his Spirit on each of us. He rescues those spiritually who recognize his voice and call on his name.

- Mark Garner, September 2015

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Nine: We Will Know The Lord, & He Is Holy (Ezekiel 26-28)**

*These three chapters include a series of laments for the city of Tyre, which was an emporium for the world during the time of Ezekiel. Yet it is also a lament over human nature, our tendency to put false hope in this world's things, and our tendency to think too highly of ourselves. These images also remind us of God's holiness, and of his hope that we will see him for who he is.*

#### ***The World's Marketplace (Ezekiel 26-27)***

In its day, Tyre was one of the world's leading commerce centers and marketplaces. Yet this lament is much more than a lament for their times. This world is itself a marketplace, where we can choose to put our hope in money and possessions, in our accomplishments and talents, or in the world's 'fun' and its pastimes. God's reminder is that none of these can satisfy our spirits.

Ezekiel 26 describes Tyre's lofty ambitions at the time, then foretells the coming siege they will face, and concludes with a lament over its fall. Ezekiel 27 begins with a lament over the appearances of Tyre, with vivid images of Tyre's luxury and prosperity (compare 27:1-24 with Revelation 18:9-19), then a lament of its past.

The prophet depicts their ambitions during a time of trouble as them saying, 'Aha! . . . I will prosper' (26:1-8). True to human nature, they couldn't help themselves from giving in to every apparent opportunity to obtain one more thing, accomplish one more achievement. They were always pursuing appearances that will disappear like a mist (James 4:13-15). Instead, God calls us near and let him explain what is better for our spirits.

Historically, Tyre would soon be attacked by Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. The city had two parts, a city on a fortified island and the other on the mainland, and Nebuchadnezzar ravaged the mainland settlement and put the rest of the city under siege. We too are under siege, a spiritual siege, yet when we trust in God, he delivers us (Psalm 31:21-22).

So there is a lament over Tyre's fall (26:17-18). It seemed so unlikely that such a strong city could have fallen so quickly. The coastlands trembled at Tyre's fall, because God has shown the world that everything human eyes can see is easily shaken, to remind us that our only true hope is above and unshakable (Hebrews 12:26-27).

The lament over Tyre's appearances describes in detail its elegant furnishings and its careful plans to look strong and prosperous (27:1-11). They went to great lengths to accumulate the best of the world's wealth, instead of putting their hope in God (Psalm 39:4-7). Jesus himself gave us his compassionate reminder not to seek things that spoil and fade and vanish; rather to fix our eyes on things above (Matthew 6:19-22).

In the lament over Tyre's past (27:32-34, see also Revelation 18:14-17) the world is lamenting what it has lost, rather than caring for the human lives who have been lost. God teaches us to consider the world's things as loss for the sake of coming to know Jesus, who gives us far better spiritual blessings (Philippians 3:7-9).

## *Cleansing The Human Heart (Ezekiel 28)*

This lament for the king of Tyre cautions us against how easy it can be for our hearts to become hardened and proud. Although this portrayal of the king has sometimes been associated with the devil, it goes far deeper than that. Each of us has been created in God's image, to be pure and holy, made to live with our God. We have all fallen, yet God is ready to cleanse us.

This king has a heart that has gone proud (28:1-5), hardened by its ways and decisions and outward results that have made him wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 28:11). God patiently reminds us that only his ways are trustworthy. We so often do not know what is good for ourselves or for others; so he calls us not to trust in our own understanding, but trust in the paths he shows us, for he can make our path to him straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).

The memorable lament over human nature contrasts how God made us to be, and the fall we all undergo (28:11-16). God created each of us to make us his treasured possession, to make us pure and sanctified, so that we could live with him (Ephesians 1:3-6).

Yet the world's empty things and its futile ways led us all astray. The world's false glitter blinds human minds to prevent them from seeing God's light (2 Corinthians 4:4-5). Our hope is not in ourselves, rather God himself is our hope and our only light of life. Though we have all fallen far short, God in his everlasting grace has raised us back to life (Romans 3:21-26).

As God would do for the Israelites, God has gathered us from the places where we have been scattered (28:25-26), and has brought us to a place where our souls are safe, our true home of walking with him. God proves himself holy by his ways that are far higher than our own, and by his righteous acts that draw us back to him, so he can pour out his grace on us (Isaiah 5:16-17).

In God's abundant grace, he has shown us his Way Of Holiness (Isaiah 35:1-10). He alone can bring life to this spiritual desert, and he has shown us the highway to him that only his hands could have made, the Way that human minds and efforts could never have found. He has proved himself compassionate and holy and faithful.

*- Mark Garner, September 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Ten: Lament & Consolation (Ezekiel 29-31)**

*As with the laments about Tyre, these visions about Egypt speak beyond the historical events, for they tell us about human nature and our need for God in every era. Egypt is an image of the bondage and emptiness of following this world's ways and possessions. As God explains this, he gives our spirits the consolation of knowing he has redeemed those who trust in him.*

#### ***Alas For Egypt (Ezekiel 29-30)***

God often needed to warn the Israelites against wanting to return to Egypt, and needed to remind them not to put false hope in Egypt. As Egypt's weakness was revealed historically, so too God reminds us not to put our hope in this world's ways and possessions and accomplishments, for these can never meet our deepest needs.

The first vision exposes Egypt's emptiness, its hollow boasts, and the weakness beneath the appearances (29:3-7). It looked a monster, seeming imposing like the sea god of chaos in Egypt's myths, yet it was a monster only God could humble and tame (Psalm 74:12-17). God opens up springs and dries up rivers; he made the night and the day.

So God calls us not to lean on the unreliable staff of this world's thinking, a reed that tears the hands of those who depend on it; and not to put false hope in this world's things, for these can never redeem us nor give us true life (Psalm 49:13-15). We trust instead in our God, who redeems us from spiritual death.

God would scatter the Egyptians (figuratively, not literally) and would gather them afterwards (29:12-16). This was not punishment for punishment's sake; rather it was to soften their hearts so that he might restore their spiritual fortunes, to give them the chance to hear his words and follow him (Isaiah 19:23-25).

Part of this vision is the curious mention of a gift for Nebuchadnezzar (29:19-20). He did not obtain as much plunder from Tyre as he had expected, so God allowed him to obtain wealth from raiding Egypt. This was in part to pay his army, yet far more so that one day he may know the living God (Daniel 4:37).

The next vision calls for wailing for Egypt, because the day of the Lord is near (30:1-6). This depiction of the collapse of Egypt's apparent strength and the collapse of its allies took place historically; yet again the spiritual meaning is far more significant. As Ezekiel tells us that Egypt's foundations would be torn down, so too did Jesus call us to look to him as our sure foundation, instead of trusting in Egypt's faulty foundations (Luke 6:46-49).

#### ***Consolation For The Fallen Cedars (Ezekiel 31)***

This vision once more reminds us of the emptiness of the world's appearances, and how suddenly they can disappear. This would be the case historically with Egypt, yet the deeper meaning is on a spiritual level - God's hopes for us to be made pure and holy, our straying into this world's empty ways, and the redemption and inward renewal God gives us by Jesus' blood and his grace.

Again we see the image of a tree nourished by deep springs (31:1-9). The tree flourishes as long as it remembers the source of life, because of God's faithful care for his cedar, a vine he transplanted from the deserts of Egypt into his spiritual pasture (Psalm 80:7-11).

Then, sadly the tree becomes proud, and gives itself over to the world's ways (31:10-14). So it is given over to the ruler of the nations, the prince of this world, for it has wandered from God's side. If we too stray from God's side, it might even bring success in this world's eyes, yet boars and insects will ravage our spirits (Psalm 80:12-15).

The consolation for the fallen trees is that none of them could ever have been strong on their own (31:15-18). God's consolation for everyone who seeks him with our hearts is that he has shined his light on us and has saved us. And his consolation for his sheep when they wander, is that they need only turn back to him and open their hearts to him, for he will restore them too and will shine his light on them (Psalm 80:17-19)

God generously gives consolation and comfort to those who seek him with our hearts (Isaiah 57:13-19). Instead of putting our trust in this world's idols, he calls us to take refuge in him, for he is near to those who recognize to his voice.

God has built up the road to him that we could neither have built nor even have found on our own, and he has removed the obstacles that were too strong for us. Our God calls us to come to him, and let him give us his healing that brings enduring peace.

*- Mark Garner, October 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Eleven: Come To God, & Live (Ezekiel 32-33)**

*The next chapter concludes a series of visions on Egypt and its Pharaohs, images of human nature and its ways. God does not punish for punishment's sake; rather often disciplines us to remind us that our hope is above, not in this world. Then we see once again the image of a watchman, and his call to come to God, and live.*

#### ***Consolation For The Fallen (Ezekiel 32)***

In this lament and the vision that follows, Pharaoh is again an image of human ambition and the false hope it puts in its own accomplishments and possessions. These human ways 'muddy the waters' and make it hard for us to see God more clearly. God consoles the fallen with the truth that none of us can stand on our own, for only God can make us stand by his grace.

The Pharaoh thought he was a lion, yet he was just a 'monster,' a beast (32:1-3). Human efforts to glorify themselves and attempts to prove themselves are mere muddying of the waters, just noise and confusion (Jeremiah 3:23). Surely in God is our hope, our salvation, our life.

Yet many are troubled by the fall of the monster, appalled at the times when one of their idols topples (32:8-10). The flesh trembles for itself when human nature is humbled (Isaiah 2:17-19), yet this is God's compassionate reminder not to run from his presence; rather come to him, set aside our idols and exalt his name.

The images of all of these nations who have fallen by the sword go much farther than historical prophecy (32:17-21). It is an image of the spiritual fall of everyone who lives by the world's weapons. For those who live by the sword will see their souls consumed by it (Psalm 33:16-19). God's grace and his words and his love are the only sure foundation.

The fallen are given the ironic consolation that they could never have stood on their own, and have been brought low to have the chance to be raised by God's grace (32:31). Human expectations inevitably lead to disappointment, so instead of giving us false reassurance, God 'humbles the beast' that he may bring us near (Psalm 68:30, 68:18); that even the rebellious may bring him the gift of a softened heart.

#### ***God's Call Of Grace & Truth (Ezekiel 33)***

We've seen before the image of Ezekiel as a watchman, who speaks the words God gives him whether his hearers listen or not. God's call of grace and truth reminds us that his ways are far higher than our own. He patiently reminds us that we cannot earn nor deserve his favor, so he simply calls us to turn our hearts to him, for only he can redeem us.

God's call to the prophet to be a watchman for the land (33:7-16, see also notes on Ezekiel 3:16-21) is not a warning to him, rather it is a reassurance. God's simple call is to speak the words that he gives him (Ezekiel 3:25-27), and how his listeners respond is between them and God.

The watchman proclaims the morning when he sees light, and proclaims the night when it is dark (Isaiah 21:11-12).

And God's call to the righteous and the unrighteous, those near and far, those high and low, is to turn to God, and live (Psalm 130:5-8). Put our hope in God's full redemption, as a watchman waits attentively for good news.

God's ways are just and gracious (33:17-20). His listeners were grumbling at Ezekiel's message, for they believed they had 'done enough' to make themselves righteous. Yet human righteousness can never bring us nearer to God, so God credits his own righteousness to those who trust in the promises of Jesus (Philippians 3:8-11).

Whether they listen to God's words and follow him, or whether they pursue their own paths, in the end they will know that he is the Lord (33:29-33). God has mentioned several times that Ezekiel's hearers may often be stubborn, so he reassures him that in the end they will also know that a prophet has been among them (Habakkuk 2:2-4), for the words Ezekiel will speak have come from God.

The watchmen have called out to us: come to God, for he has opened the gates to his presence through the blood of Jesus (Jeremiah 31:3-12). He draws us with his unfailing love, not with rules nor threats nor false promises. He leads us to springs of living water to give our souls what they really need. He who scattered Israel gathers his flock, and he carries us back to our true home with our God.

*- Mark Garner, October 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Twelve: God Cares For Us Like A Shepherd (Ezekiel 34)**

*The image of scattering and gathering occurs often in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel's era, this took place in a literal sense, when Judah was exiled to Babylon and later allowed to return. Yet these images speak on a far deeper level. We often wander and scatter when we follow the wrong shepherd, yet our compassionate God gathers us back when we seek him with our hearts.*

#### ***They Were Scattered Because They Had No Shepherd (Ezekiel 34:1-10)***

Just as sheep wander in all directions when they have no shepherd, we easily go astray when God is not our shepherd. There are many in this world who want to be our 'shepherd' - some are well-intentioned, others are not, yet in any case they can never bring real meaning nor a real purpose nor true life to God's sheep.

The Scriptures often use sheep as an image for human beings, because we wander over all the earth, looking for greener pastures or chasing the things of this world (34:1-6). Some of this world's shepherds care for us, many don't; yet in any case they cannot give us the things our souls really need, nor heal our deepest wounds, nor rescue us from spiritual foes too powerful for us all (John 10:11-13).

God's sheep are scattered when they forget their God, their resting place for our souls, the sure foundation for our times (Jeremiah 50:6). This world cannot be any of these things for us. Yet as his sheep, we can always pray for one another, reassure one another of God's truths, and encourage one another to look above and seek God who is worthy of all honor, our eternal Shepherd who can give peace to our souls and who gives us everything (Isaiah 26:12-13).

And our Jesus is able to rescue to his straying sheep; he knows where to find us, he knows what our souls need, and he is willing to give us what we need (34:7-10). He saves us from being eaten by wild beasts, he bore our sins and bled and died to redeem us; by his wounds are healed (Isaiah 53:4-6). He was the perfect sacrifice to rescue us from spiritual death and to raise us up to the true life of walking with our God.

#### ***God Gathers His Scattered Flock (Ezekiel 34:11-24)***

God himself is our true Shepherd, who seeks for us and finds us wherever we are scattered. When we forget to look above and follow the light of Jesus, we get lost in the world's darkness and clouds without even realizing it. Yet God is our faithful shepherd who finds us and is always near, patiently calling us back whenever we stray, reminding us to listen to his voice.

God himself searches for us; and when we recognize his voice, he rescues us from the places we were scattered (34:11-16). When we take our eyes off of God, we are scattered on days of clouds and darkness (Isaiah 59:9-10), led astray to pursue our own ways, to seek this world's empty things, to put false hope in this world's futile thinking, seeking meaning and life where we can never find it. Yet God has compassion for us and gathers us back (59:15-16).

He brings us to our own land, our true home with our God, where we can find rest for our souls (Psalm 62:1-2). He leads us to rich spiritual pasture where he gives us his spiritual blessings that our spirits need (Deuteronomy 33:13-15), he produces spiritual fruit of grace and truth and patience that we couldn't have produced on our own.

As God makes these comforting promises, he has some reminders for his sheep (34:17-24). He will shepherd his flock with justice (Psalm 96:11-13), because he does not judge by appearances nor by our accomplishments nor by our talents nor by our knowledge; rather, he looks for those who seek him with their hearts.

Thus he reminds his sheep not to act like fierce lions who muddy the water and trample the pasture by pursuing their own ways (Ezekiel 32:2). Instead, he calls us to be like our shepherd; listen to his voice, and follow him (John 10:2-5). Just recognize God's voice of grace and truth.

### ***We Will Know That He Is The Lord, Our God (Ezekiel 34:25-31)***

We know that he is the Lord, our God; and he shows us who he is. The things he made show us his majesty, his ways show us his holiness, his words show his understanding and his compassion. Most of all, he wants us to consider the acts of grace he has done to show us the closeness that he wants to have with us, to draw us near and make us the sheep of his pasture.

We will know he is with us, and we are his people (34:25-31). We know that he is faithful, for he makes his everlasting covenant of peace with us (Isaiah 54:10). We know that he is compassionate, because he sends showers of spiritual blessing, softening our hearts and lavishing his grace upon us (Psalm 65:9-11).

When we call on his name, he breaks the bars of the yoke of this world's empty ways, because of his unfailing love for us (Psalm 107:13-16). We are the sheep of his pasture, whom he cares for and justifies by his own righteousness; for he is our Rock of salvation, our Maker, our God (Psalm 95:1-7).

The Lord is our true Shepherd (Psalm 23). He leads us to green pastures of grace and truth, and leads us by quiet waters even in this world's noise and confusion. He shows us the right path, the path that we couldn't have found and couldn't have built. He comforts us in times of fear and sorrow by reminding us of what is imperishable and true and real. And our God has called us to dwell with him now and forever.

*- Mark Garner, October 2015*

**THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED:  
STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

**Notes For Week Thirteen: The Wasteland Will Become Like A Garden (Ezekiel 35-36)**

*After the comforting images of God being our Shepherd who searches for us, there is an aside to Edom; and then Ezekiel returns to describing the renewal and cleansing that only God can bring. We see again the image of God giving us a new heart and a new spirit, God's desire to renew us inwardly, to transform the dry ground in our hearts into a spiritual garden only he could plant.*

***Struck Down, But Not Destroyed (Ezekiel 35:1-36:15)***

The message to Edom again has a deeper meaning beyond the literal and historical application. God has allowed Judah to be struck down physically, yet not to destroy them, rather to renew them inwardly. Likewise, he will humble the hard hearts of Edom, to give them the chance to seek him and find him.

God's message to the Edomite heart is also a message for every time and every place (35:1-15). God patiently reminds us not to allow our hearts to become proud and hardened, not to harbor hostility and rivalry and malice (Obadiah 1:3-4). The Edomites had rejoiced over the fall of their neighbors, their brothers in Judah, and had even added to their affliction (Obadiah 1:10-12).

God calls us instead to look with pity on those who are brought low by their own ways and pride. For as Edom would be desolated and refined (Obadiah 1:21), God will soften our hearts in any way he can, so that we may turn to him and seek him with our hearts.

God's message to the mountains and hills and desolate ruins of Israel (36:1-15) also speaks to us all. God plows the unplowed ground in our hearts and sows his seed of faith in them so that we may seek him, so that he may soften us and may shower us with his grace and his spiritual care (Hosea 10:11-12).

As God also delivered Judah from suffering the scorn and taunts of the nations around them, he too has redeemed us; he protects us from the accuser's taunts and has taken away the disgrace of our own sins (Isaiah 25:7-9). He has taken away the shroud of spiritual death, and has clothed us with Jesus and his own righteousness.

***We Will Know That He Is The Lord, Who Rebuilds & Replants (Ezekiel 36:16-38)***

As Ezekiel now returns to the imagery of God giving us a new heart and a new spirit, he explains that God does this out of his own faithfulness and his holiness, not because of anything we had done. We cannot make ourselves righteous; and this world's accomplishments and talents and possessions will fade away; but God's righteousness never fails and his salvation lasts forever.

God shows us the holiness of his name through his trustworthy ways and his words of truth (36:16-23). Ezekiel explains how God refines and purifies us for the sake of his own holy name (Isaiah 48:9-11); as we often see in Ezekiel, so that we will know that he is the Lord and may

understand who he is. He washes us and renews us not because we were righteous or deserved it, rather because of his unfailing love and his desire that he may be near us (Titus 3:4-6).

So the prophet again reassures us of God's promise to give us a new heart and a new spirit when we turn to him (36:24-38). Only God himself can cleanse us from all impurity and can sanctify us through and through; only God himself can make us stand in his presence - and he is faithful, and he will do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

God washes away our sins, and he removes the idols and hardness and self from our hearts, so we may come near and follow our God (Hebrews 10:19-22), to reassure us of his compassion and his own faithfulness.

And our God promises us that when we listen to him and follow him, the land laid waste will become like a garden; he will restore the peace of being with him, and he will rebuild our spiritual ruins (Isaiah 51:3-6). So we no longer need to put false hope in this world's teachings nor its ways, nor in our own knowledge nor our efforts nor our accomplishments nor our possessions, rather to look above and see our God, our living hope.

For he is the Lord, who renews us inwardly day by day (2 Corinthians 4). His great light has come into this darkened world, and he has shown us his glory and compassion for us. He has put his precious treasure in our fragile jars of clay, that Jesus death and Jesus' life may live in us, that we may have the true life of knowing him and may understand his unfailing love for us.

So he gives us his gentle reminder, to look beyond this world's appearances, fix our eyes on things above. For what physical eyes can see is mere dust and ashes, while the unseen is imperishable and eternal.

*- Mark Garner, November 2015*

## **THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED: STUDIES IN EZEKIEL**

### **Notes For Week Sixteen: God's Glory Fills The Temple (Ezekiel 42-44)**

*The series of visions that figuratively describe the new temple continues. After reaching the Most Holy Place, there is a look at the priests' rooms, and then Ezekiel sees God's glory returning to the temple and filling it. He has seen this vision once before as he watched God's glory leave his people, but now he knows that it has returned.*

#### ***A House With Many Rooms (Ezekiel 42, including a review of Ezekiel 40-41)***

The 'tour' of this new temple has taken us from the outer gates into the new Most Holy Place; and now it concludes with a look at the priests' accommodations. As before, these images and all the details are figurative, meant to suggest to us what it means to approach God's presence, and to help us understand why God needs to cleanse us and sanctify us.

In Ezekiel 40 and 41, we gradually approached the Most Holy Place. The elaborate details simply emphasize what it means to come into God's presence. Note also that these details vary significantly from the details we see in the earthly temple.

From a view of the outer gates and their porticos and alcoves, we pass into the outer court, its gates and decorations, into the inner court and its furnishings, and finally into the new Most Holy Place, where we see many rooms level upon level. All this proceeds in a leisurely manner, so we may contemplate that we are approaching God's holy presence, where we must let him cleanse us.

God does not give us instructions as to how to build this temple, as he did with the earthy temple, for this temple has not been made with human hands (Hebrews 9:23-25). This is the new way that Jesus opened for us; he has cleansed us and sanctified us that we may be with our God.

Thus, the descriptions of the rooms for the priests remind us of the holiness that only Jesus' perfect ministry could have brought us (Ezekiel 42). God has brought us holy offerings to eat, the living bread of Jesus that nourishes our spirits with its truths and the true life it tells of (John 6:51). He has made holy too our place and our garments, not by our many sacrifices or efforts, rather with the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 10:11-14).

#### ***The Coming Of God's Glory (Ezekiel 43:1-9)***

Once again Ezekiel sees the vision of 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord,' the images of the living creatures and the wheels and the brilliant light surrounding God's presence, that we read about in Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 10. This time, God has 'come home,' he has come to live with those who seek him with our hearts.

As the glory of God comes through the gate (43:1-5), we hear his voice that sounds like rushing waters. We see this image again in Revelation (Revelation 1:15), for from the presence of our God flows the river of the water of life (Revelation 22:1-2). The land is full of the radiance of his glory, the glory that God showed us through Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-3), entrancing images for us to contemplate about what it means to be in God's presence.

In his joy and his reverence as he senses these things, the prophet falls facedown; and then the Spirit lifts him up and takes him into the inner courts. When we too finally see the true glory of Jesus, the glory of his compassion and truth and grace we see in the cross, our spirits too can only bow and worship - and Jesus puts his right hand on us to reassure us (Revelation 1:17-18).

Then God's voice tells us that this is where he will live forever (43:6-10), where his throne will be, a place for 'the soles of his feet.' These images reassure us that God has chosen to dwell among those who listen to his voice and follow him, God has come to stay with those who seek him with our hearts (Psalm 132:13-16). God does not live in buildings made by human hands; rather, he sanctifies our hearts and makes them a place for his Name.

### ***The New Priesthood (Ezekiel 43:10-44:31)***

As with the images of the temple itself, these visions of the new priests are also figurative. Just after the prophet has seen God's glory return, he first asks him to consider this new temple and explain it to the people. Then he describes what it is like to be a 'priest' in his new covenant. God continues to explain what it means to be cleansed and made holy.

Ezekiel is again told to describe what he has seen, to describe this new temple to the people (43:10-27). He calls us too, to consider its perfection, 'its arrangements, its exits and its entrances,' for this is the far greater and perfect heavenly sanctuary that Jesus entered by his own blood (Hebrews 9:11-12), to allow God to draw us near.

The area on this new mountain will be most holy, so God calls us as we approach to let him make us clean, let him give us a new heart and a new spirit, and let him remove the idols from our hearts (Psalm 24:3-4, see also Ezekiel 36:25-27).

So as the prophet describes the new priesthood (Ezekiel 44), we also see again the image of the prophet seeing God's glory and falling facedown as we sense what it means to live with him. He calls us to learn the difference between the holy and the common, and to distinguish between the unclean and the clean (44:23, Leviticus 10:10), to learn what matters to God and what pleases him.

As with the Levitical priests, the only lasting inheritance we have is the imperishable inheritance of dwelling in our God's presence and in his glory and in his light (44:28, 1 Peter 1:3-4), the very great gift of his closeness.

Worthy is the Lamb of God (Revelation 5:6-14), who could open the scroll to tell us God's deep truths, who purchased with his blood from every nation and every time and every language, and who has made us priests and a kingdom, that we may be the sheep of our Heavenly Father's spiritual pasture and have the eternal life of knowing him. Worthy is the Lamb of all honor and all glory and all of our praise.

*- Mark Garner, November 2015*