Ezekiel - Commentaries by Walter Thomas Prideaux Wolston

Forty Days of Scripture, Ezekiel's Forty Days: Israel's End; or, Guilt, Grace, and Glory

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(Ezekiel 4:1-11)

“Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. In the fifth day of the month, which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin’s captivity, the word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was there upon him” (Ezek. 1:1-3).

These verses introduce to us a very remarkable man, who was alike a priest, a poet, and a prophet of no mean order. The meaning of his name, Ezekiel, “whom God will strengthen,” is instructive when we remember what he himself passed through as a captive. It was as being directly sustained by God, that he was able to identify himself with the sorrows of the guilty nation whose judgment he first predicts with great detail, and whose final deliverance and exaltation by the hand of God, he describes with the utmost precision.

Josephus states that Ezekiel was a youth when carried away captive, but whether such was the case we have no certain means of being assured, and the general character of his writings would scarcely bear out the supposition. He was contemporary with Jeremiah and Daniel, and his prophecy would appear to open about the fifth year of his captivity, B.C. 594. This we learn from the second verse of chapter 1. You will remember that Jehoiachin, king of Judah, was carried into captivity in the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar, along with a great many of his subjects. Thus the record stands: “And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came against the city, and his servants did besiege it. And Jehoiachin the king of Judah went out to the king of Babylon, he, and his mother, and his servants, and his princes, and his officers: and the king of Babylon took him in the eighth year of his reign. And he carried out thence all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king’s house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the LORD, as the LORD had said. And he carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valor, even ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths: none remained, save the poorest sort of the people of the land. And he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon, and the king’s mother, and the king’s wives, and his officers, and the mighty of the land, those carried he into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And all the men of might, even seven thousand, and craftsmen and smiths a thousand, all that were strong and apt for war, even them the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon” (2 Kings 24).

Though the power of Judah was broken, and Jehoiachin carried captive, Jerusalem was not then destroyed, and over it the King of Babylon set Jehoiachin’s uncle, changing his name from Mattaniah to Zedekiah. He reigned eleven years in Jerusalem, doing evil in the sight of the Lord, and eventually breaking his covenant, and rebelling against the King of Babylon, thus leading to the sack of the city in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar (see 2 Kings 25:8-10). During these eleven years Ezekiel dwelt by the river Chebar, a captive, and there it was that he says, “The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.” He there learned that God’s ancient people were not only in captivity but to be in captivity to the Gentiles, and that, because of their guilt God would not own them any longer. He further learned that the power of the sword was to be passed into the hands of the Gentiles, although, as I have said, at that time the capture of Jerusalem, then ruled over by Zedekiah, had not yet taken place.

While at Chebar Ezekiel receives the following instructions from the Lord (Ezek. 4:1-11): “Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and portray upon it the city, even Jerusalem: and lay siege against it, and build a fort against it, and cast a mount against it; set the camp also against it, and set battering rams against it round about. Moreover, take thou unto thee an iron pan, and set it for a wall of iron between thee and the city; and set thy face against it, and it shall be besieged, and thou shalt lay siege against it. This shall be a sign to the house of Israel. Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it; according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it thou shalt bear their iniquity. For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days: so shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel. And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side, and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for a year. Therefore thou shalt set thy face toward the siege of Jerusalem, and thine arm shall be uncovered, and thou shalt prophesy against it. And, behold, I will lay bands upon thee, and thou shalt not turn thee from one side to another, till thou hast ended the days of thy siege. Take thou also unto thee wheat, and barley, and beans, and lentils, and millet, and fitches, and put them in one vessel, and make thee bread thereof, according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon thy side, three hundred and ninety days shalt thou eat thereof. And thy meat which thou shalt eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day: from time to time shalt thou eat it. Thou shalt drink also water by measure, the sixth part of an hin: from time to time shalt thou drink.”

In representing thus the impending siege of Jerusalem, God points out the years of iniquity that led to her judgment — for Israel in general three hundred and ninety, and for Judah forty. To Ezekiel comes the striking command, “Lie thou also upon thy left side...three hundred and ninety days” (Ezek.4:4). And then: “Lie again on thy right side, and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for a year” (Ezek. 4:6).

The sin of Israel exceeded that of Judah, but Israel is looked at as a whole, and the interests of the whole nation are not only before the eye of the prophet, but he is to identify himself with their iniquities. However little the guilty nation may have felt, without doubt this godly prophet deeply felt and owned before God the sin of his nation, and accepted the consequences thereof, and whether for three hundred and ninety days for Israel, or forty days for Judah, bore their iniquities in spirit before God in the remarkable position which these verses describe, himself, without doubt, sustained by God, otherwise it would have been impossible for him, for so protracted a period, to have so remained and obeyed the strict injunction, “And thou shalt not turn thee from one side to another, till thou hast ended the days of thy siege” (vs. 9), or

lived upon the scanty diet detailed in verses 9 to 11. The point of Ezekiel's "forty days" would seem to be this, that he absolutely identifies himself with the iniquity of his nation, and is prepared to bear the consequences of their iniquity, and that without a murmur.

One very striking feature in Ezekiel's history would seem to be the entire subordination of his whole life and feelings as a man to the great prophetic work to which he was called. He neither speaks nor acts like an ordinary man, but thinks and feels as a prophet. One very, striking illustration of this is found on the occasion of the death of his wife. There is something deeply touching in his brief narrative of the moment when "the desire of his eyes" was taken away with a stroke, and when he was commanded not to mourn. The word of the Lord ran thus: "Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke: yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down. Forbear to cry, make no mourning for the dead, bind the tire of thine head upon thee, and put on thy shoes upon thy feet, and cover not thy lips, and eat not the bread of men. So I spake unto the people in the morning; and at even my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded" (Ezek. 24:15-18).

That was indeed a memorable day. God noted it by the command, "Son of man, write thee the name of the day, even of this same day: the king of Babylon set himself against Jerusalem this same day" (Ezek. 24:2). The day that Nebuchadnezzar began the siege the wife of the prophet died, and although she was the object of his tenderest affections he was not to mourn, and did not. That he possessed the sympathies and affections of humanity is manifest by the beautiful touch of tenderness with which the narrative is introduced; but he subordinates himself entirely to the will of Jehovah, and sinks the interests of his individual life in the work of his prophetic office.

All this is intensely in contrast with almost every other great servant of God, whose history we have recorded in the Old Testament. While the events of Ezekiel's personal history are thus kept out of sight, it is interesting to notice the remarkable vigor and energy clearly manifest in his character. God knew that he had to oppose a "rebellious house," who were "impudent and hardhearted" (chap. 3:7-9), and hence said to him: "Behold, I have made thy face strong against their faces, and thy forehead strong against their foreheads. As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead; fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house."

Ezekiel's writings abound with figurative representations, but whether unfolding heavenly visions, or truths clothed in the garb of allegory and enigma, definiteness and vigor of conception mark his words in a very striking way. What he saw in vision is described with a clearness, sharpness of outline, and minuteness of detail which almost belong to real existence; and while one says again we never meet him in his writings as an ordinary man, you cannot but feel that he was manifestly an extraordinary one — he was just, in fact, the suited vessel that God could take up and use to reveal His mind in the unfolding of striking truths as to Israel's judgment near at hand, or her future glory which his prophecies disclose.

It may help you to read his prophecy with greater interest if I briefly glance at the salient features of the book, and indicate its general outline. In attempting to do this, I cannot do better than quote the words of another, to whom I am indebted for much light on the subject. "The first twenty-three chapters contain testimonies from God against Israel in general, and against Jerusalem in particular. After that the surrounding nations are judged; and then, beginning with chapter 33, the prophet resumes the subject of Israel, announcing their restoration as well as their judgment. Finally, from chapter 40 to the end we have the description of the temple and of the division of the land."

The general scope of the book is as follows: The earlier chapters describe the sin of Israel which made God's judgment of them a necessity, as His name had been dishonored and His house polluted. The glory of the Lord thereupon leaves that house and retires to heaven. The judgment then falls on Jerusalem, and the nation is scattered. Their many enemies, who rejoice in their chastisement at God's hand, and in the removal of His house and presence from the earth, are then severally judged by Him. Next, a work of repentance and self-judgment in Israel takes place on their restoration to their land and to God's enjoyed favor. Their ancient foe, the Assyrian, then seeks again to dislodge them, and is overwhelmed by God's own direct interposition. The temple, God's earthly house, is then rebuilt, never again to be disturbed. The glory returns to that house and to Israel, in connection with their acceptance of their once-rejected but now gladly-owned Messiah — the true David. The book closes with God's blessing flowing out through the whole earth, now at peace and rest under the sway of Jehovah-Jesus, the last word of the prophecy being, "The Lord is there" (Ezek. 48:35).

The destruction of Jerusalem is the central point of Ezekiel's earlier predictions. Before that visitation of God's chastening hand arrived, through His chosen rod, Nebuchadnezzar, He warns the people against indulging in blind confidence in Egyptian help (Ezek. 17:15-19; compare Jer. 37:7-9), to rid themselves of the Babylonian yoke, and assures them that the destruction of their city and temple was certain, and near at hand. This prediction is finally confirmed by the announcement that Nebuchadnezzar had invested the city (Ezek. 24:2).

During the interval between the commencement of the siege and the arrival of the news that Jerusalem had actually fallen (Ezek. 33:21), the burden of his prophecy (Ezek. 25-32) is against foreign nations, whom God would judge because they had interfered with those who had been His people, but whom He, because of their sins, had now not only called Lo-ammi (not My people), but treated as such.

From the thirty-third chapter on, his principal object is to show how God will yet step in and restore Judah and Israel, now captive and scattered, to their own land, and bless them under the true David, when He will " make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all; and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms, any more at all" (Ezek. 37:22). Thereafter follow the final judgment of their earliest foe — the Assyrian — the Gog and Magog of chapters 38 and 39, and then the directions regarding the rebuilding of Jehovah's temple, the re-establishment of sacrifices suited to the moment, and the redivision of the land of Palestine.

It will be impossible to go much into detail, but a cursory glance at the contents of the three main divisions, just indicated, I will attempt. Chapter 1 opens with Ezekiel beholding a vision of God's throne, not now, as formerly, seen in Jerusalem, but outside the city and unconnected with it. The attributes of God, under the figure of four distinct classes of created beings on earth — a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle — the four being united in one are the supporters of this throne on which the God of truth sits, It is evidently the universal sovereign throne of God here presented, as in relation to the Gentiles. Those who had hitherto been owned as His people He judges from that throne. He is no longer in their midst. What Ezekiel saw deeply impressed him, and he says: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one that spake" (Ezek. 1:28). This reminds one strongly of the vision John had in Patmos when he fell at the Lord's feet as dead (Rev. 1:17).

What Ezekiel heard, as given in chapter 2, indicates plainly God's relation to Israel. And he said, "Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee" (Ezek. 2:1). This epithet, "Son of man," is the one by which God repeatedly, right through the book, addresses His prophet, and gives us the key to His position in relation to Israel. It is Christ's own title, the one by which He loved to speak of Himself all through the Gospels, where He is viewed as the rejected One of Israel, and really as being outside the nation. By God's giving it to Ezekiel, the prophet is put in direct connection with Christ as rejected. It is very important to apprehend the import of this title, which the 8th Psalm attributes to Jesus in connection with His rejection and exaltation, and which the Lord Himself specifically adopts as being rejected as the Messiah (see Psa. 2) by Israel. I refer to His striking injunction to His disciples recorded by Luke. He had asked them, "Whom say the people that I am? .... Peter, answering, said, The Christ of God. And he straitly charged them, and commanded them to tell no man that thing; saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day" (Luke 9:18-22).

As regards Israel, God was rejected, and Ezekiel takes his place with Him and His throne, and consequently is sent with messages to the people here described as "impudent," "stiff-hearted," and "most rebellious." He was to speak whether they would "hear" or "forbear," but any way they should "know that there hath been a prophet among them" (Ezek. 2:4-7). He then has handed to him a roll of a book, written within and without, like the one John saw (see Rev. 5:1).

In chapter 3, Ezekiel eats the roll which he had received, finding it sweet as honey in his mouth. God's communications are always sweet to the receiver, though their final intent have not that character. He is then strengthened of God and bid go to the children of his people. It needed that his forehead should be as adamant (Ezek. 3:9) to testify to such "a rebellious house," whose moral iniquities compelled God to cast them off. Carried by the Spirit of God to Tel-abib among the captives (Ezek. 3:14), he then again sees the glory of the Lord (Ezek 3:23), and is told not to go among the people. They were so rebellious that they were not to be warned. God would make his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth (Ezek. 3:26) to enforce his silence, for He would no more plead with them in love, as He had done by Jeremiah, until He again opened his mouth.

Ezekiel 4, which we have already considered, depicts the impending siege of, and famine at, Jerusalem, which Jehovah, in chapter 5 says, He "had set in the midst of the nations and countries round about her" (Ezek. 5:5) to give a true testimony to Himself. So far from that had she been that her "wickedness more than the nations round about her" (Ezek. 5:6) compelled His condign judgment, a just retribution for her sins. She therefore instead of being a witness to Him should be "a reproach and a taunt, an instruction and an astonishment unto the nations round about" (Ezek. 5:15).

Chapter 6 shows that this judgment was to be executed not only on Jerusalem, but on all the high places of the mountains of Israel — notorious for their idols — as well as the valleys and rivers. They should know that Jehovah had not " said in vain that I would do this evil unto them" (Ezek. 6:10), for those far off should die of pestilence, and those near by should fall by the sword, yet mercy would spare a remnant (Ezek. 6:8).

The desolation culminates in chapter 7, when an end comes on "the four corners of the land" (Ezek. 7:2). "Mischief shall come upon mischief" (Ezek. 7:26) is the striking conclusion. The reason of all this overwhelming judgment by Jehovah is plain. "As for the beauty of his ornament, he set it in majesty: but they made the images of their abominations and of their detestable things therein; therefore have I made it unto them an unclean thing (see margin). And I will give it into the hands of strangers for a prey, and to the wicked of the earth for a spoil; and they shall pollute it" (Ezek. 7:20-21). The temple, the place of His holiness, into which God's professing people had introduced idolatry in all its forms, was to be polluted by "the worst of the heathen" (Ezek. 7:24). With chapter 7, the first prophecy which delineates the judgment of God's earthly people concludes. They no longer are His witnesses, save as their very judgment, lasting to this day, is a standing testimony to the truth of His Word, a solemn consideration for faithless and Christless Christendom.

With chapter 8, commences a new section of Ezekiel's prophecy, extending to the end of chapter 19. In it are a number of distinct revelations. The prophet is in his own house, with the elders of Judah, when Jehovah's glory appears to him, and, in "the visions of God," he is taken to Jerusalem, "to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy" (Ezek 8:3). He then sees in detail the reasons for God's judgment, as he beholds the awful idolatry carried on there by the very leaders of Israel. The year before the Lord had threatened to give up His Sanctuary. Now Ezekiel sees why He was compelled to do it.

In chapter 9 the destruction of Jerusalem lowers on the threshold, and the men with slaughter-weapons are seen (Ezek. 9:1-2). Then "the glory of the God of Israel" begins to depart from the house. It first goes up from the cherub to the threshold of the house (vs. 3), and thereon God commands the deeply deserved vengeance to be executed on those who had so sinned. Those who "sighed and cried for the abominations done," were to be spared (vs. 4), none other. The mass showed their moral state of depravity by saying, "The Lord hath forsaken the earth, and the Lord seeth not" (Ezek. 9:9). Because He had not judged their sin they inferred that He was indifferent to it. Fatal mistake!

Chapter 10 is intensely interesting. The throne and its Occupant are again in view (vs. The man clothed with linen and possessing the ink-horn (Ezek. 9:2-3) is thus commanded: "Go in between the wheels, even under the cherub, and fill thine hand with coals of fire from between the cherubims, and scatter them over the city. And he went in, in my sight. Now the cherubims stood on the right side of the house, when the man went in; and the cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub, and stood over the threshold of the house; and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the LORD'S glory" (Ezek. 10:2-4). That house had been filled with the Lord's glory at first, for deepest blessing (see 2 Chron. 5:13-14). Now it was similarly for judgment. The city which contained it was to be consumed with coals of fire. Jehovah's ire could no longer be restrained, and He leaves His throne, stands upon the threshold, and, so to say, superintends the judgment He has commanded. There is something intensely solemn in this. The cherubims and the crushing wheels of that throne, again detailed here (Ezek. 10:7-17), could have effected this easily, but not so, the dishonored Lord of that sadly-defiled house stands on its very threshold, personally to direct the judgment which would efface its existence. Nebuchadnezzar a little later was the providential power used to this end, but the personal intervention of Jehovah here could not but deeply strike the spiritual mind.

Chapter 11 reveals the spirit of unbelief that dominated the dwellers in Jerusalem. The prophet sees five and twenty princes of the people whom God describes as "men that devise mischief and give wicked counsel to this city" (Ezek. 11:2-3). These twenty-five men were, I judge, the high priest and the twenty-four heads of the courses of the priests, which shows the awful state of affairs when the official leaders of religion were the prime movers in idolatry and every sin. They regarded Jerusalem as impregnable, spite of Jeremiah's previous warnings.

These God afresh threatens, and one of them dies on the spot, as Ezekiel speaks (Ezek. 11:13). This leads him to intercession, and he learns that, as regards those who had already been taken captive, God would be to them “a little sanctuary” (Ezek. 11:16), and bring them back to their land eventually.

Then the glory of the Lord, which in Ezekiel 10:18-19 had moved from the threshold of the house, as if loath to leave it, and stood over the cherubims — who in their turn mounted up from the earth — took its final departure. We read, “And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city” (Ezek. 11:23). That mountain, I conclude, was the Mount of Olives, from whence Jesus went up, and to which He will yet return.

So the glory of God left the earth, and though it revisited it at the birth of the Lord Jesus, again it retired when He, rejected of earth, ascended to heaven. When He shall return that glory will, on the ground of His redemption work, not only fill the house, yet to be rebuilt, but will flood the earth as well (see Num. 14:21). “Lord, hasten that day,” our hearts may well cry.

Chapter 12 foretells the ineffectual efforts of King Zedekiah to escape the snare set for him, and predicts his being brought to Babylon. “Yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there” (Ezek. 12:13), is the divine forecast of his sad history — some five years later. “So they took the king, and brought him up to the king of Babylon to Riblah; and they gave judgment upon him. And they slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him with fetters of brass, and carried him to Babylon” (2 Kings 25:6-7). The godless proverb in Israel, “The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth” (Ezek. 12:22), that is, that God’s messages were worthless and not to be heeded, He now says shall cease to be used, for the Son of man was bidden to say, “The days are at hand, and the effect of every vision” (Ezek. 12:23). Unbelief might say, “The vision that he seeth is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off” (Ezek. 12:27). God’s answer was, “There shall none of My words be prolonged any more; but the word which I have spoken shall be done” (Ezek. 12:28).

In chapter 13 the false prophets of Israel who seduced and deceived the people by “vain vision” and “lying divination” (Ezek. 13:7), saying, “Peace; and there was no peace; and one built up a wall, and lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar” (Ezek. 13:10), are exposed and judged.

Chapter 14 shows the elders of Israel again sitting before the prophet, who learn that they will be judged according to their iniquities. “Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols” (Ezek 14:6) is then uttered in the ears of prophets and people alike, God declaring that the presence of such men in their midst as Noah, Daniel, and Job would not stay His judgment. Their righteousness would deliver only their own souls (Ezek. 14:14-20).

Under the figure of the vine tree (see Psa. 80; Isa. 5) which yields no fruit, chapter 15 shows that only utter consumption was before Jerusalem and its inhabitants. A worthless tree was only fit for fuel.

In chapter 16 Jerusalem is reminded of God’s dealings in grace, and that what had been in misery and degradation He had washed, anointed, and beautified. All His favor, however, she had used in the service of idols, and to procure the support of Egypt and Assyria. She had played the harlot, and should be dealt with as such, her very paramours being made the executors of God’s just judgment of her. Spite of this, His oath and covenant of promise (see Ezek. 16:8) would yet be made good (Ezek. 16:62-63).

The riddle and the parable of the two great eagles of chapter 17 find their explanation in Zedekiah’s certain judgment, for breaking his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar. This he had made, and sworn by God (see 2 Chron. 36:13) to keep. God had put the power of the kingdom in Nebuchadnezzar’s hand, for he was the head of gold that Daniel saw. The Babylonian king feared God in measure, and respected His name. By intriguing with Pharaoh to escape Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke, Zedekiah broke his covenant to which Jehovah’s name had been attached. This filled up the cup of his wickedness, and led to his downfall, for God said, “As I live, saith the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwelleth that made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant he brake, even with him in the midst of Babylon he shall die” (Ezek. 17:16).

Chapter 18 contains the important principle that “the soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (Ezek. 18:20). The individual would be dealt with by God according to his own conduct. It is not a question of what their fathers had been. Their own iniquities demanded and would entail God’s judgment. Long before, God had threatened to visit “the iniquities of the fathers upon the children” (see Ex. 34:7). This principle is departed from. Individually they were guilty, and as such would be judged; nevertheless, where repentance was manifest, God would pardon, for He had no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23). It must be borne in mind that what is spoken of here is temporal judgment, physical death, because of sin now. It gives us no teaching as to the eternal judgment of sin, which is taught elsewhere.

The demand for “lamentation for the princes of Israel” in chapter 19 gives in allegory the subjugation of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1), and then the captivity of Jehoiachin, terminating thus the regal power of the house of David, which had no longer “a scepter to rule” (Ezek. 19:14).

Chapter 20 commences a new prophecy which terminates in chapter 23. God reminds Israel of what He had done for them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt “and into a land flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands” (Ezek. 20: 6). They had rebelled on their road to that land in the wilderness. “Nevertheless,” He says, “Mine eye spared them from destroying them, neither did I make an end of them in the wilderness” (Ezek. 20:17). Spite of all His grace they had polluted themselves, and God determined to scatter them among the heathen. But God would fulfill all His purposes, and would yet regather them, saying, “I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm” (Ezek. 20:34). But as He pled with their fathers, and purged them in the wilderness, so would He yet do to the returning house of Israel. And the rebels would die on their road to the land (Ezek. 20:34-38).

Chapter 21 unfolds in very striking language the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar on Jerusalem. It seemed a question in his mind whether he should attack Jerusalem or Ammon. “For the king of Babylon stood at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways (to Jerusalem and Ammon), to use divination: he made his arrows bright, he consulted with images, he looked in the liver” (Ezek. 21:21). Jerusalem might think it “false divination” (vs. 23), but God’s judgment must be carried out, so the sword is unsheathed and not to return to its scabbard. God’s

throne had left the earth, “the times of the Gentiles” had begun; the judgment-day of the wicked prince of Israel — Zedekiah the profane — had come, and God would overturn-overturn-overturn until He come whose was the throne and the diadem — even Christ Himself (Ezek. 21:25-27).

In chapter 22 Jehovah sums up and recapitulates the sins of what He now calls “the bloody city” (vs. 2), and of the princes, the prophets, the priests, and the people of Israel. He says, however, “I sought for a man among them that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none” (Ezek. 22:30). Judgment must have its way, but one cannot but note the tenderness of God for His people, ere the stroke fell, strikingly reminding us of the blessed Lord’s words at a later date: “How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not” (Luke 13:34)

In chapter 23 the sins of Samaria (Israel) and Jerusalem (Judah) are very solemnly portrayed. In each case illicit intercourse with the heathen, which He had forbidden, is the ground of Jehovah’s judgment. They were sisters in sin, and should be similarly judged (Ezek. 23:32). God vindicates His judgment, saying, “Because thou hast forgotten me, and cast me behind thy back, therefore bear thou also thy lewdness and thy whoredoms” (Ezek.23:5). They were to reap what they had sown.

Chapter 24 records the fact that “the king of Babylon set himself against Jerusalem this same day” (Ezek. 24:2). The siege of the city now commences. The same day, as we have seen, Ezekiel’s wife dies (Ezek. 24:18). The terrible judgment falling on Jerusalem is graphically described under the figure of a caldron on the fire.

Chapters 25 to 32 are occupied with detailing God’s threatened judgments on the various nations round about Israel because of their bygone conduct towards, and existing spirit of hatred to His people. They would rejoice at the destruction of Jerusalem, and the setting aside of God’s earthly sanctuary. He would let them know that though His earthly people had failed He still was God. If judgment fell upon His own people, because of their sin, His hand would also be upon those who hated the objects of His love. The latter He had been obliged to chastise because of their sins.

Chapter 25 brings Ammon, Moab, Edom, and the Philistines before us as the objects of prophetic dealing by God. They were really intruders in, and dwellers on, Israel’s territory. The first three were related to God’s people by consanguinity (see Gen. 19:36-38 as regards Moab and Ammon, and Gen. 25:25-30 regarding Edom). When Israel took possession of Palestine, by God’s command, under Joshua, Philistia, a strip of land about forty miles long, and ten to twenty broad, lying between Joppa and Gaza, on the sea-coast, and west of the tribes of Dan and Simeon, was not subjugated (see Josh. 14:2). As a consequence of this failure on Israel’s part, the Philistines were ever thorns in their sides, and sometimes their masters. They were finally subdued in the days of Samuel (see 1 Sam. 7:13). Confederates in opposing God’s chosen people, these four nations are now marked out as special objects of divine vengeance, for, if you touch God’s people, you touch Him.

Their delight that Israel was humbled by God did not better their case. The judgment of Edom is graphically described by Obadiah, verses 17 and 18 of his prophecy confirming God’s threats found in our chapter, “I will lay my vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel” (Ezek. 25:14). Remarkable further instruction as to this is given by Daniel, who says that, when the king of the north shall yet attack Israel (see Ezek. 38; 39), “these shall escape out of his hand, even Edom and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon” (Dan. 11:41). The reason for this is plain. God will finally punish them, and the Philistines too, by the very people they so persistently persecuted. When Messiah sets up His kingdom, and Ephraim and Judah are again one, Isaiah tells us, “They shall fly upon the shoulders of the Philistines toward the west; they shall spoil them of the east together; they shall lay their hand upon Edom and Moab; and the children of Ammon shall obey them” (Isa. 11:14). The retributive judgment of God will yet be executed by Israel on these nations, who long ago so oppressed them.

Chapters 26, 27 and 28 form a separate prophecy regarding Tire, which was in Israel’s territory. That godless city, alluded to by the Lord Jesus in the Gospels (see Matt. 11:21), represents the world with its riches and lusts. It hated God and God’s people, and was glad of Israel’s fall, as giving freer course to the gratification of her own selfishness. Her triumph God thus checks, saying in chapter 26, “Son of man, because that Tyrus hath said against Jerusalem, Aha! she is broken that was the gates of the people; she is turned unto Me; I shall be replenished now she is laid waste. Therefore, saith the Lord God, Behold I am against thee, O Tyrus” (Ezek. 26:2-3); “I will make thee like the top of a rock; thou shalt be a place to spread nets upon; thou shalt be built no more” (Ezek. 26:14); “Though thou be sought for, yet shalt thou never be found again” (Ezek. 26:21). This prediction Alexander the Great was the means of carrying out (B.C. 332).

The motives that move the world are wonderfully exposed by God in these prophecies. It dislikes Him and His people alike, but must yet answer to Him, and receive judgment at His hands.

Chapter 27 describes the grandeur and commercial relations with all the world of Tire, and then announces that in “the day of thy ruin” (Ezek. 27:27) all her former friends “shall hiss at thee; thou shalt be a terror, and never shalt be any more” (Ezek. 27:36). Such is the world and its end, fickle as the waters which carried Tire’s ships. Tire represents the commercial glory of the world which passes away.

Chapter 28 depicts the prince and the King of Tire, both judged for their pride. He who is the prince of this world’s glory (see John 14:30; 16:11) is represented here as a man, and is told, “Because thine heart is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a God, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas; yet thou art a man, and not God... thou shalt die the deaths of them that are slain in the midst of the seas” (Ezek. 28:2,8). There is little doubt that in what follows, in verses 11 to 19, the King of Tire is emblematical of Satan — the prince and god of this world. A creature of God, his heart was lifted up; he corrupted his brightness, became an apostate from God, and the enemy of God and man. His advantages had been the occasion of his fall. He exalted himself against God, and was cast out, as profane, from the mountain of God.

Sidon’s fate is then told us. Sidon had been associated with Tire as “a pricking brier” and “a grieving thorn” to the house of Israel (Ezek. 28:24). Her judgment is predicted, and then God declares that He will regather the house of Israel, when the judgment of the nations is executed. His words are, “Yea, they shall dwell with confidence, when I have executed judgments upon all those that despise them round about them; and they shall know that I am the LORD their God” (Ezek. 28:26). God’s purposes are never frustrated either by the sins of His people or the pride of His foes.

Chapters 29 to 32 give us the judgment of Egypt, Israel’s old oppressor. God had given Nebuchadnezzar the supreme power. Egypt as a nation was proud of its governmental power. She had said, “The river is mine, and I have made it” (Ezek. 29:9). God would not allow this

assumption, nor permit her to have what He had given to Nebuchadnezzar for His own purposes. Every nation must bow to him. It was God's ordainment, for he was "the mighty one of the heathen." Assyria had already fallen (see Ezek. 31:10-11). Pharaoh must fall also. If Tire — which Nebuchadnezzar besieged by land and water for thirteen years without success — yielded him no wages, Egypt should be his recompense, and her judgment would lead to Israel's blessing (Ezek. 29:18-21).

It is important in reading these prophecies to observe that Nebuchadnezzar is regarded as the servant of God, in executing His judgment, both on Jerusalem and on the nations round about, and thus really freeing the land of Israel of them. Doubtless, in all this which has historically taken place, we have a picture of that which will yet occur in Israel's future history, when God again puts His hand to recover, restore, and bless them in their land, then to be forever free from every oppressor.

In chapter 33 we enter a new phase of God's dealing with His people. We look on to the last days, yet to come. The people are looked at as having been judged. He has carried out His word spoken in Hosea; they are, "Lo-ammi," that is, "not My people." Their judgment has been but partial, however, for bad indeed as that was which Ezekiel describes, before Messiah's return their case will be yet more terrible, as they suffer under the two beasts described in Revelation 13 — the revived Roman Empire and Antichrist.

Individual conduct is again in question in chapter 34. The shepherds of Israel are exposed; their conduct toward the flock being entirely in contrast to the tender care of God, who now emphatically declares: "Behold, I, even I, will both search My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out My sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment" (Ezek. 34:11-16). He further says: "And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the LORD have spoken it" (Ezek. 34:23-24). He then adds, "There shall be showers of blessing." It is God who will deliver the sheep, and bring in the true David, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom, in verse 29, He calls "a plant of renown." Of Israel He says, "And ye are my flock, the flock of my pasture" (Ezek. 34:31). God again owns them as His people.

Chapter 35 again brings Edom, Israel's blood-relation and perpetual hater into view (see Ezek. 35:5), God's judgment on them will be according to their hatred of His people.

In chapter 36 the restoration and blessing of Israel is most touchingly unfolded. The mountains of Israel are addressed. "Ye shall shoot forth your branches, and yield your fruit to my people of Israel; for they are at hand to come" (Ezek. 36:8). Their foes had declared the land to be one that devoured its inhabitants, that is, that it was barren. God would make it fruitful beyond all measure, and multiply earthly blessings to His people (Ezek. 36:30). More than this, He would bless them spiritually. Verses 24-29 describe their spiritual regeneration, alluded to by the Lord when speaking to Nicodemus. The Jew must be new-born to enter God's kingdom on its earthly side, just as, today, the Christian is born again to participate in its joys on the heavenly side.

Chapter 37 gives us Israel's national resurrection. We behold a valley full of dry bones, which the prophet presently sees coming together clothed with flesh and skin, living, and standing on their feet, an exceeding great army. This, he learns, is the whole house of Israel (Ezek. 37:1). God will yet take the twelve tribes out of their grave among the nations, where they now are, put His Spirit in them, and cause them to live (see Ezek. 37:12-14). Under the figure of the two sticks, joined in one, we get the reuniting of the divided kingdoms of Ephraim and Judah. They are made one nation. God says, "And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all; and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all" (Ezek. 37:22).

Then the true David, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be their king. Absolutely cleansed from their sins (Ezek. 37:23), they will walk in the fear of the Lord. They will be under the blessing of the everlasting covenant of peace (Ezek. 37:26). Gods sets His sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. What infinite grace after all the sin of that nation, culminating in the murder of His Son and their Messiah, for God thus to say, "My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Ezek. 37:27).

Chapters 38 and 39 present the final attack of Gog and Magog, their oldest enemy — the Assyrian — upon them, when replaced in Palestine, and enjoying God's blessing. The prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal — probably Russia, Muscovy, and Tobolsk (Ezek. 38:2-3) — comes up against Israel, only to be utterly overwhelmed by God, who will maintain His people according to His word. The Gog and Magog of Ezekiel must not be confounded with the Gog and Magog of Revelation 20. The former attack Israel before the millennial reign of Christ, whereas the latter come against the saints generally, at the close of the thousand years of the Lord's reign.

Chapters 40 to 46 reveal divine instruction as to the rebuilding of God's sanctuary in the midst of His people. "A sanctuary which shall no more be defiled" (Ezek. 43:7). Connected with the rebuilding of the temple is, of necessity, found the reestablishment of sacrifices and an earthly priesthood.

The glory of the Lord revisits the earth, and Jehovah returns to His house in chapter 44, and returns to remain, hence the striking word, "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it, because the LORD, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut" (Ezek. 44:2).

In chapter 45 the portion of the prince, the priests, and the Levite is arranged, and the passover reestablished (Ezek. 45:21).

Chapter 46 regulates their worship of God, now known on true redemption ground. In chapter 47 waters flow from the sanctuary, healing on every hand, and the waters abound with fish. It is a striking figure of the blessing that will flow out in the millennial reign of Christ, for " everything shall live whither the river cometh" (Ezek. 47:9), is the statement. Widespread indeed will the blessing be, but it is not absolute or complete even in that day, for "the miry places thereof and the marishes thereof shall not be healed; they shall be given to salt" (Ezek. 47:11). The millennial day of glory is imperfect at the start, and also at the finish, when Gog and Magog again oppose God. Only in the day of God — eternity — will everything be as God would have it, and, blessed be His name, will have it, to His everlasting glory.

The division of the holy land among the twelve tribes occupies chapter 48, as well as the place of the rebuilt Jerusalem, and the prophecy closes with the blessed statement, “And the name of the city from that day shall be Jehovah-shammah,” that is, “The Lord is there” (Ezek. 47:35).

How wonderful are God’s ways! How deep His mercy! Who but He would have foretold such a wondrous ending to the history of a people so guilty and disobedient as Israel had been. But God is God, and the millennial day will convince the world of that, which we know now, that “God is love.”

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