

FREELAND CHURCH OF SCOTLAND  
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# EZEKIEL

Sermon Series 2012

Kenneth Gray

Derek Peat

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## Sunday Evening Service 29th April 2012, Derek Peat – Ezekiel 1



In his introduction to Ezekiel, one of the longer books of the Bible, Derek invited us to think about the time we each turned 30 years of age. No matter how memorable our 30th birthday might have been, it could hardly have been as remarkable and memorable as Ezekiel's. At the beginning of chapter 1 we find Ezekiel on the banks of the river Kebar – by the end of the chapter his life has taken a completely new direction!

### CONTEXT.

These events take place during the captivity of the sons of Judah in Babylon (reckoned to be on the 31st July in 593BC), in the 5th year of Jehoiachim's exile and 5 years before Solomon's temple will be destroyed. The son of a priest, Ezekiel would have expected his 30th birthday to have marked his own entry to the priesthood. Instead, here he is far from the temple, among idolatrous foreigners rather than among his own people and close to his God in Zion.

But it is the judgment of God that has brought the exiles into Babylon and the people are too dispirited to be able to sing songs to their Lord in this alien land where (they believe) their God does not dwell. Now God puts his hand powerfully in Ezekiel's life and fashions him from potential priest into transforming prophet. Through Ezekiel the people will come to realise that their God is immensely bigger than they have previously understood and he is not constrained within the limits of their imagination or within the confines of any earthly geography. The visions that Ezekiel experiences blow away the notion that the Lord lives only in Zion.

### CREATURES.

We find the creatures who populated Ezekiel's visions to be bizarre and not a little bewildering. However, Ezekiel would have been less 'freaked out' by this strange imagery. He will have been familiar with Mesopotamian iconography and statuary and better equipped than we are to interpret their symbolism. For example the four-faced cherubim (not the pretty winged babes we think of) would have called to mind the statuary guarding the temple and 'holding up the sky'. To reinforce this recognition that something god-like was there we find the majesty of the lion, the swiftness of the eagle, the power of the ox and the wisdom of the human being combined in the description of the creatures. God's presence is indicated by how these creatures move. These are not mere statues. God's presence causes the wheels to move and when Ezekiel looks upward he discerns on a throne a figure *'like that of a man'*. Ezekiel is describing his *vision* of God – he is careful to avoid claiming that he has seen God himself.

### CREATOR

Ezekiel's vision reveals God's **transcendence**. God's people may be suffering in exile but he is above all things and in still in control of all things. Through God's grace Ezekiel's vision gives us a glimpse of the majesty of God. The vision also reveals God's **sovereignty** – in his all-encompassing power he sees everything and he is omnipresent. The people are not far from God in Babylon – he is there with them! Now the defeated, exiled people can have new hope. But God's message remains one of **judgment**. The fiery imagery reminds us that God works out his own

purposes and his judgment is not yet finished. Having previously dealt with Israel's unfaithfulness by means of the Assyrian invasion God has caused Judah's sinfulness to be punished by Babylonian exile. Through Ezekiel's prophecies the people will be shown how to avoid destruction through repentance and renewed obedience. Ezekiel's response to the voice of God and this amazing vision is to fall down in awe and reverence.

## RELEVANCE

What can we learn from this experience of Ezekiel's? Firstly God has no desire to be distant. Just as he spoke to Ezekiel in a manner that was contemporary and culturally relevant so too does he speak to us. But we need to be listening, tuned in to his communication. Secondly, God's message has not changed and, like the Israelites and the sons of Judah we can accept it or reject it with the same consequences – salvation or death.

Like Ezekiel, may we fall down and submit to God's power, mercy and love.



## **Sunday Evening Service 6th May 2012, Kenneth Gray – Ezekiel 2&3 “ Why will we not listen?”**



Kenneth observed that ministers are often asked to explain what they mean when they talk about being “called to the ministry”. It can be difficult to describe. For some it has been a growing realisation that God has been prompting them; for others the words of a sermon they have heard may have brought a particular ‘epiphany moment’. For Ezekiel it was direct and unmistakable: ‘He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you ” As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.’

But what most ministers and Ezekiel have in common is a sense of compulsion to answer the call of God to service. When God puts his hand on your shoulder no resistance is possible.

Much is written nowadays about how to achieve a ‘successful ministry’ and advice is liberally offered about the techniques required to fill churches. Kenneth described two ministries he had known of where, despite evangelical preaching, faithful to the gospel, one of the churches steadily declined in numbers until it closed and the other lost 100 members within a year because those who left had found the message unpalatable.

The truth is that most ministries are Ezekiel-type ministries. God doesn't sugar the pill for Ezekiel. He tells Ezekiel repeatedly that he has chosen him to prophesy to a rebellious people who not only will not listen to him but who will not listen to God himself. Many ministers have a similar experience. Many people are offended by the gospel.

It is hard to imagine a less propitious environment in which to start one's ministry than among a group of exiles living far from their homeland among idolatrous foreigners who speak a different language and who have enslaved them. Ezekiel faces a different challenge from other prophets such as Isaiah. He cannot preach "Repent or you will be exiled in captivity!" His ministry will be to people who have already lost their homes, their status, their rights, their freedom and their trust in and reliance on God. Their state of mind recalls for us that of many of the Jews who languished in the concentration camps during WW2. For many who were liberated after the war, it proved impossible to re-establish connections that the war had severed.

### **THE SWEETNESS OF GOD'S WORD**

When God speaks to Ezekiel he is captivated. He falls down once again in awe and reverence at the majesty, glory and wonder of God. The difficulty of the task ahead, the predicted intransigence of the people to whom he will minister are undaunting because of the sweetness of God's word. We too should feel this way when God calls us – whatever our situation, however inauspicious the circumstances. He is the same God who spoke to Ezekiel. He will equip us as he equipped Ezekiel. We must never forget that no matter what attempts have been made over the centuries to undermine the gospel, its truth has withstood them all. God's word is trustworthy and has been transforming people's lives for thousands of years and continues to do so today.

### **SOME PEOPLE WILL JUST NOT LISTEN!**

Kenneth concluded by describing a car journey he once took where he repeatedly ignored signs saying 'Road Ahead Closed' convinced that he'd find his own way over possible obstacles ahead. The sign posters weren't being unhelpful or nasty or difficult – they were simply telling the truth - but Kenneth chose to ignore their message until confronted with the inescapable obstacle at the end of the road.

We must continue to speak the truth no matter how unwelcome or unpalatable people find it. We must not slip in to the bad practice, all too common in many Christian communities, of watering down the message and undermining the truth of the warning that repentance is demanded by God.



### **Sunday Evening Communion Service 13th May 2012, Kenneth Gray – Ezekiel 4 "Powerful Symbolism"**



Kenneth began by mentioning a recent publication for ministers to exchange views and concerns in which a debate about whether ministers should give up delivering children's talks attracted a lot of discussion. It seemed that so many ministers found this difficult that their proposed solution was

to give up trying to get the message across to young people!

In this passage we find that God is so determined to get his message across to a rebellious people that he lays out his plan, in graphic detail, for Ezekiel's ministry for the next year and a half.

As regular churchgoers we probably think we 'get the message' quite quickly but how much of it do we actually retain from one week to the next and how much does it actually change the way we behave towards God and one another?

At this point in the story Ezekiel is living among and prophesying to the exiled community leaders. They are no doubt praying for an end to their captivity and hoping for the restoration of Jerusalem to the Jews, strong and inviolate. Jerusalem is their great delight and the focus of their hopes and aspirations.

In order to get their attention and to remind them of on whom they should be placing their reliance, God instructs Ezekiel to carry out a series of symbolic prophetic acts. In a series of powerfully symbolic instructions Ezekiel is to deliver a most unwelcome prophecy that describes the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the remainder of God's people. In five years time Jerusalem will be besieged and laid waste not because of the Babylonians – they are the instrument that will be used – but because God's hand will come upon his people in judgment.

Having just broken bread together in our service of communion, it is hard for us to read about God's way of dealing with the sinfulness of his people. A communion service is a special occasion when we can perhaps get distracted ensuring that the table linens are snowy white, that the silverware containing the elements is shiny, that the elders are smartly turned out. But what communion allows us to do is remember that the glory of the resurrection could only happen after the barbarity of the crucifixion.

We call to mind Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his weeping for that city. He was then to die there, nailed to a cross – the just sacrificed for the unjust; the righteous for the unrighteous. However uncomfortable it might be to read about what lies in store for the Jews and Jerusalem it is as nothing compared to the day that the Holy One himself was crucified and left to die.

The reason for the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel and the reason for the crucifixion are the same. **God hates sin.** He cannot bear sin. Sin is like a particularly nasty germ that can multiply and divide and destroy. God had warned and warned the people to repent but they had not altered their sinful ways. Through Ezekiel God tells the people what to expect: the destruction of Jerusalem. He is exercising his judgment on the Jews because as God's people they should know better.

This lesson warns us that this same judgment will come down on our church if we do not follow God's ways and recognise that he knows what is best for us. We must repent of sin and resist it.

In this communion service we have broken bread and pondered God's amazing grace. We have been challenged once again to respond to that grace and to change our ways. **Have we got the message? Time will tell.**

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**Sunday Evening Service 20th May 2012, Derek Peat – Ezekiel 8-11 “ Idolatry Punished ”**



These chapters bring us a quarter of the way through the book of Ezekiel. Up to this point we have considered the amazing vision that Ezekiel received on the bank of the Kedar River, when he saw the cherubim and the figure that had the likeness of the glory of the Lord. Then, in the following chapters we learn from this figure speaking to Ezekiel that God will act in judgment upon Israel because the people have persistently behaved in a way that dishonours the Lord. They have ignored repeated admonitions to repent, they have carried on with their sinful practices.

God then speaks to Ezekiel of why he will act – why he will exact such a devastating punishment. We learn that God has come to view his own chosen people as deserving of his harshest judgment because ‘you have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you.’ He expected better of his own followers, so their sin is all the more abhorrent and intolerable. If they but realised it, time is running out for these stubborn, rebellious Israelites.

By chapter 7 we learn that the why of God’s actions must not be questioned. God is acting with full right, or ‘complete moral integrity’ as Christopher Wright puts it. God says at verse 3 ‘I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for your detestable practices.’ If we think the punishment is grim, then consider how outraged God must feel for this to be his response to their sinfulness. After all, when God gave Moses the commandments he made ‘thou shall have no other gods before me’ the first and ‘you shall not make for yourself an idol’ the second commandment. Now we will see how much God truly means this.

In tonight’s study (Chapters 8-11) we now have moved on to 17 September 592BC, just over a year since the first vision, still a little while before the temple, the first temple completed by King Solomon, is to be destroyed. Just as Ezekiel might be thinking things are calming down again, the figure of the glory of the Lord appears again in September 593BC.

This time, the Spirit lifts Ezekiel and takes him to the entrance to the gate at Jerusalem. Over these four chapters we read what he learns and what he sees in this vision which carries him round various points at the temple and what is called the Sanctuary, possibly the Holy of Holies, that most protected place in the temple where God was thought to dwell. In these chapters God’s anger is fully portrayed.

In unrelenting repetition the people’s detestable practices are laid before Ezekiel and

God's instruments of punishment are ranged in readiness to heap down coals of judgment on the sinners who have failed to repent. Six guards are brought from the city each with his own weapon. As foretold, God 'will deal with them in anger. I will not look on them with pity or spare them.'

**This gives us a very clear message about the character of God.** God is not in any sense a weak god, he is unwavering and determined to exact the punishment on his creatures that he sees fit. God says to the executioners that killing has to take place without showing any pity or compassion, with all people including children being wiped out.

We are told of the man in linen with a writing kit who is sent to Jerusalem to identify and mark for protection those who are grieving and lamenting over the sinful behaviour of their fellows. It shows to us that God is an understanding God and does not wish to punish those who are true to him, and seeks to spare his believers from suffering in that way. It makes a real distinction between those true to God and those who have a nominal affiliation to their faith, yet go and practise behaviours which dishonour him.

This has parallels in, for instance, Noah who was found to be righteous in his generation (7v1).

**This teaches us that God loves us to repent** and be put right, but he cannot tolerate continued wrongdoing. The book of Ezekiel has relevance for us in the church today. In this week where the General Assembly sits and determines a national profile and emphasis, we must get back to putting the Lord first. A reading of Ezekiel shows that God is a God who guards his glory, sharing it with no-one, and is a God who will act. The ministers and elders in the Kirk have to take a lead in telling the church how to act.

It is time for the church to turn back to the gospel of God. It is time to tell people what the Christian gospel offers that nothing else can - that message of grace and eternal life.

**The last point then is to ask what hope there is, after such a frightening message. How do we hold hope against such fear of judgment?**

The overriding thing is, of course, that God longs to be in relationship with his people. God delivered many victories for Israel, and held off punishing them many times. This is a God who is 'slow to anger and rich in love' (Psalm 145).

The point that Christopher Wright makes is fascinating, and it is what gives us hope when we see tragedy in life now. He states that when the Babylonian attack came, there must have still been some who were innocent, or relatively innocent, who suffered death. If this is the case, how does this reconcile with the vision of those with the mark to protect them?

His conclusion is that there must be more to life and death than the physical circumstances as we understand them, more than our actual earthy being. So if we

work this through, what we are saying is that amidst the death toll there will be many sent to judgment for eternity but some who will go to glory. So it is the conduct they displayed during their earthly life that leads them to heaven.

**The second message of hope is found in what Ezekiel hears:** ‘This is what the sovereign Lord says: ‘I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.’

Although God will judge, he will not destroy the remnant in exile completely; there will come a time when they can return to Jerusalem.

### **Conclusion**

God has said in ch7v3 ‘I will judge you according to your conduct’. We know God acts with complete moral integrity, and the enormity of the devastation that follows reflects the enormity of the sin being punished.

We will find that God continued to love the remnant of his people. They returned to rebuild the temple. We must strive to rebuild the church in our land too, and see the work of the cross tower triumphant in this land.

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### **Sunday Evening Service 27th May 2012, Kenneth Gray – Ezekiel 12 “The Vision Comes To Something”**



We have now reached chapter 12 of the Book of Ezekiel and we find the message has not changed: this rebellious people must mend its ways and pay heed to the warning from the Lord. As we read Ezekiel’s prophecies chapter after chapter we find the message repetitive, laboured. Yet there is a very good reason for this repetition – the message just isn’t getting through to the Israelites! Ezekiel is delivering God’s warnings but the people do not believe him.

With chilling clarity the Lord warns that He will put an end to the proverb familiar to the Israelites “The days go by and every vision comes to nothing” . He tells Ezekiel to warn the people that there will be no more “false visions and flattering divinations”. From now on the Lord will speak what He will and “it shall be fulfilled without delay”!

The Israelites were no doubt used to hearing prophetic utterances from individuals stationed at their regular posts keen to share their ‘ insights’. Many will have predicted doom of one sort or another but these ‘prophets’ will have lost their ability to influence when the predicted outcome has not come to pass. There are only a few true prophets recorded in the Bible because only those few spoke God’s truth- the hard, unpopular truth which pointed the way to repentance and salvation. The Israelites being a stubborn, rebellious people have, over time, done what human beings usually do – they have cherry-picked the ‘truths’ they liked and dismissed what they did not like.



At the end of this General Assembly week, Kenneth observed parallels in the Israelites' behaviours with how the various constituencies within the General Assembly conduct themselves and promote their various Christian perspectives. There is frequently a tension for example within the 'evangelicals' as to whether it is more God-honouring to express opinions in conciliatory language and thereby win votes during debates or stick to a more condemnatory hard line and lose votes. This passage teaches us that when there is a temptation to 'sugar the pill' the truth must not be compromised.

In our day we are less worried than we once were about, say, threats of wars. Nowadays many people are concerned about whether they will lose their jobs and be unable to pay their bills. The financial system we used to have confidence in now gives us pause for thought. Perhaps in 10 years' time we will be able to look back on these days and smile about the concerns that exercised us.

In this chapter Ezekiel is foretelling a time when the Israelites will experience the horrendous consequences of ignoring God. In 10 years time they will look back on the destruction of their nationhood and the blinding of King Zedekiah by Nebuchadnezzar's men and rue the days when they ignored God's warnings. At the Lord's command Ezekiel acts out these disasters to come but the people dismiss the warnings as merely something that might happen at some time far in the future. If such a situation were ever really imminent then surely they could always, as they have done before, repent and be forgiven? Not so, says the Lord. Faced with man's wilful intransigence God sometimes has to bring down his hand in judgment. The people have ignored warning after warning. When the Lord's judgment comes Zedekiah is the king, the embodiment of Israel's nationhood and his treatment at the hands of the Babylonians is utterly shocking and demoralising for Israel.

How easy it is to drift along from day to day without confronting reality, continually putting off thinking about our responsibilities as people of God.

Kenneth, reflecting on this year's General Assembly, concluded that it had been a relatively happy and harmonious gathering with fewer contentious issues than in recent years. One could come away in self-congratulatory mode pleased to have run through the scheduled business efficiently. The real questions for our Church of Scotland remained, however: How had the Assembly engaged with society? How compellingly had we presented the reality of sin and its consequences?

**We cannot condemn people who ignore God if the church doesn't bring the Gospel to the people.** It's true there had been an uplifting service conducted in Princes Street gardens but what happened after the church participants packed up and went home? As a church we have a responsibility to do more. Our own open air service last Sunday did not transform Bridge of Weir.

On this Pentecost Sunday we recognise that a new Pentecost is needed. We need it because we must do the work of spreading the Gospel. There is nobody else – just us. God has commissioned us.



## Sunday Evening Service 3rd June 2012, Jack McHugh – Ezekiel 14 “Idolaters Condemned”



The Israelites are in a crisis situation. They are being continuously exhorted to repent and change their ways but they are obstinate. They no longer really believe their God is with them. They are seeking comfort and relief in all the wrong places. They are being swept along on powerful currents of compromise and are being dragged off course from obedience to the one true God.

The Bible is full of failures – Moses, David, Peter to name but a few. But failure can be learned from; all that's needed is God's help and forgiveness. With this it is made possible for 'failures' to try again and succeed in carrying out the plan God has for them.

The Israelites believed that God had abandoned them but Ezekiel was chosen by God to refute this belief. The Israelites have failed on a huge scale but they are God's chosen people and he loves them. To save them he will bring down his judgment on them so that they will return to him.

Their sin has been disobedience towards the sacred covenant – they have been seduced by the idols of their captors. As a result of poor leadership and their own gullibility the Israelites have been led astray and they have forgotten God and the Scriptures. In this chapter we find them coming to Ezekiel seemingly for advice and guidance but the Lord sees into their hearts and knows they remain idolatrous in their hearts. Until they renounce their hidden practices of idolatry they will remain mired in sin.

Are not we in the Church, like the Israelites, guilty of idolatry in our hearts? We spend huge amounts of our time and attention trying to fulfil our ambition to be 'successful'. We are so fearful of 'failure' that we expend our energies trying to develop strategies for increasing numbers, paying our bills, protecting our buildings. This has at times led the Church into practices aimed at avoiding offending members lest we lose them from our headcount. Being seduced by worldly symbols and gauges of 'success' have we not compromised the Gospel? Should our Church's ambition not rather be to take sacrificial steps forward in faith?

In Freeland Church the centrality of Jesus Christ must remain visible to all in everything we undertake. Let us not be hampered by fear of failure but let us rely on God to guide our path and equip us for his tasks. Let Jesus Christ be our only ambition.

**In the United States tiny pine beetles are capable of killing millions of giant redwood trees. So it is with the devil. He creeps in to small areas of our thinking and our lives and over time erodes the very foundations of our faith.** And the decline starts with small, seemingly insignificant compromises. We must examine our hearts for areas where we have let down our guard and allowed the evil one a foothold.

The Church of Scotland is nationally in 'planning for decline' mode. The truth is that we no longer have confidence in the power of the Gospel to change people! In the past many of the

Church's preachers have, like the Israelites, had idols in their hearts. The Good News proclaims that U-turns are possible with God's help. There is a way back, a way out of sin if we are honest with ourselves and honest with God. God knows our failures but he rejoices to forgive.

Ezekiel might at times seem a difficult book for us to understand but it speaks of real situations and real people who, like us, are part of God's plan and our study of it is timely.



## **Sunday Evening Service 17th June 2012, Kenneth Gray – Ezekiel 18 “Judgment”**



Chapter 18 marks the point in the book of Ezekiel where we find things beginning to move towards the fulfilment of the prophecy. Previous chapters have been reiterating the warnings to repent and foretelling that there will be judgment to come. Now we discover a revolutionary new idea and God reveals on whom his judgment will be visited.

Kenneth alluded to the critical General Election taking place today in Greece. This is a situation where the huge burden of national debt created by previous generations is having to be shouldered by current and, no doubt future, generations – not only in Greece but with implications across the wider European Community.

In Ezekiel's time, and for some 2½ thousand years before, the cultural thinking regarded children (especially male children) as the possessions, the assets of their parents. Parents were able to treat their offspring as they pleased. This is hard for us to grasp. We regard our children as a precious gift, a joy and we endeavour to provide our best for them all through our lives even into our grandparenthood and great-grandparenthood. In the mindset of the Israelites children were regarded as much part of themselves as one of their own limbs. It seemed logical to them therefore that the consequences of their sins should be borne also by their children. Indeed we today know of situations where the consequences of parental irresponsibility and selfishness are all too evident in the undeserved burdens borne by their children- for example infants, born to drug-addicted parents, who have to be weaned off drug dependency.

In this chapter the Lord reveals a revolutionary new idea. From now on the Lord will judge each person according to his/her own behaviour and only their own guilt will condemn the people – not that of their forebears. Furthermore, a sinner who repents will be given credit for his repentance but a formerly good man who falls into sin will be judged in his sinfulness. How much fairer and liberating this new Word seems.

Liberated then from this 'guilt by association' does this mean the people can now enjoy a kind of 'innocence by association'? As human beings we want to have our cake and eat it. It is human nature to desire to be covered by the mantle of others' righteousness when it suits us, without our having to constrain our own independence and self will.

Then too, how often have we heard people, particularly bereaved people, expressing the hope that unbelievers in their own families who have died might be saved on the strength of the faith of the deceased person's relatives! God's message through Ezekiel is quite clear: we cannot use any small righteousness we might possess to make others righteous. There's a big fly in the ointment – man's nature is sinful.

In Genesis 18 we know that God would have saved Sodom and Gomorrah if he had found even ten righteous men there. How then does a God of grace and mercy act in response to the affront of man's sin and when judgment is necessary?

**What is needed is a Saviour who will assume the burden of the world's sin.**

This is where the book of Ezekiel is now pointing forward to the need for the Messiah. We know that Jesus will be that Saviour. Future generations, right up to our own and beyond, will be able to choose or reject Jesus and the salvation he offers. That is why we must, as a church, never give up exhorting people to come to Christ. The whole point of preaching is to convict souls and bring them closer to God and faith in Jesus Christ.

If anyone here tonight has never yet come to Jesus and accepted him as Saviour and Lord, this is the moment.

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### **Sunday Evening Service 24th June 2012 Kenneth Gray, Ezekiel 20:30-44 – 'Revival Comes**



In this passage of Ezekiel we are coming closer now to the Lord's judgment being exacted. The concept of judgment is an unpalatable one – too unpalatable for some people in the church. Kenneth observed that he frequently encounters self-proclaimed Christians who state that this God of judgment is 'not the kind of god they worship'. What they forget is that this is God as revealed in the Bible. They fail to grasp the whole purpose of judgment – namely to purge sin and enable sinners to be restored to a state of rightness with God. God doesn't simply forgive and forget

without judgment – that's the hideous truth of the Cross. We need to come to the place of judgment, of shed blood, before forgiveness is possible. We cannot move from death to life unless we have repented and turned away from sin.

In Ezekiel we can begin to come to terms with the work of a prophet. A prophet's role is not simply to wring his hands and wail 'Woe is me!' His role is not only to alert people to coming consequences of their sin but also to point to how the people can avert disaster by changing their ways.

The people of Israel had persisted in their idolatrous practices throughout their history. Even when Moses was experiencing his most marvellous and intimate encounter with the Lord the people were down the mountain fashioning an idol of gold to worship! The Lord will not tolerate idolatry. He sees the people's weaknesses and how they have allowed themselves

to be corrupted by intermarriage with non-believers and influenced by alien cultures. In their desire to fit in and be accepted within the society they find themselves, the people have even involved themselves in child sacrifice. This is why the Lord's judgment will come upon them. They didn't want to be 'the light of the world' – they didn't want to be different from the world around them. But they are God's chosen ones. He will excise the sinful and restore the penitent.

Paul's letters repeatedly warn about the danger of sin within the church because, if unchecked, it will result in the kinds of godlessness exhibited by the Israelites. This is already true of some branches of the church today. Kenneth cited the example in recent years of a church in Denmark. A minister had been sacked by church authorities for stating that God did not exist but his congregation had petitioned for his reinstatement because they didn't feel his atheism was an impediment to his ministry!

The fault lines are becoming visible. Many in the church who have previously considered themselves as 'liberals' must wake up to the realisation that the 'so far and no further' line they once drew in the sand is now so far behind them as to be invisible. That's what God will act to prevent, but revival comes at a price.

Some churches water down the Gospel and tolerate people's sinful ways in the mistaken belief or hope that it's better to draw people in at any cost so that we can try and change them once they're part of the fellowship. This approach is wrong on two levels;

- It implies the Gospel isn't good enough or able to transform lives without being diluted.
- It suggests we are embarrassed to be different from the world.

Paul tells us to boast only in Jesus Christ. We must stand firm, hold the line and never give up. Persecution may follow but encouragement and hope springs from the knowledge that God took a tiny church and with it He transformed the world. God's purpose is not that anyone should perish but that all should be saved.

Not everyone in Ezekiel's time will have practised idolatry or approved of idol worship. The same is true in our society and our challenge is to reach out and bring such people to Jesus Christ.

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## **Sunday Evening Service 1st July 2012, Derek Peat, Ezekiel 24 – 'The Sovereign Lord Acts'**



DEATH OF EZEKIEL'S WIFE

In this chapter we find Ezekiel some 4½ years on from where this book started and his life has taken a course completely different from what he had anticipated. As a Levite he belonged to the tribe of Israel that had responsibility for the ordinances of religion and the Temple. Son of Buzi the Priest, Ezekiel no doubt expected to follow his father's footsteps into the Priesthood. Exile in Babylon put paid to those aspirations.

For the Israelites, everything was about worship, and worship was about the Temple. Their sense of identity and nationhood was bound up in their access to the Temple. Their exile to Babylon meant separation from the Temple and the rituals of worship there. A sense of their

desolation is expressed in the words of Psalm 137 ' by the waters of Babylon where we wept, how could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

So Ezekiel, the aspirant priest, has been called by God to minister to these exiles as a prophet. Furthermore, to ensure his own opinions don't get in the way of God's message, Ezekiel's tongue has been made silent so that he cannot rebuke or instruct the people, except when God desires to communicate, and at that point Ezekiel introduces each message with the words: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says'

Through Ezekiel's visions God reveals his omnipresence. The Israelites will come to realise God is not confined within the Temple at Jerusalem but is everywhere. Also Ezekiel has been equipped in his vision with the knowledge that the Temple will be destroyed. This needs to be communicated to the exiles. But they are more focused on their obsession with the Temple than they are desirous of obeying God. Up to this point they have failed to respond to God's warnings through Ezekiel but now, in 588BC, the warnings come to an end and the attacks on Jerusalem begin in earnest.

Now we discover in just a few verses that Ezekiel has a wife who is 'the delight of his eyes'. We can only surmise what kind of person she was but as the spouse of an aspirant Levite priest she will have been considered virtuous and suitable in accordance with the rules laid down for such a role. Given the requirements for the job she thought she was undertaking we can only imagine what this young woman had to deal with when everything changed. The journey into captivity had taken away any trappings of comfort that she might have expected. Nor did she ever get to be a Priest's wife. Instead she finds her husband has become this completely different person whom God has chosen for a very demanding and high profile role that will scarcely have made him popular among the people. As God's prophet Ezekiel is involved in unprecedented and alarming experiences – visions, physical transportations and even dumbness between God-given pronouncements.

We are told nothing about where Ezekiel's wife is or what she knows as God uses Ezekiel as his instrument to carry out his plan. She doesn't feature at all.

We only learn Ezekiel has a wife just as God tells him that he is going to lose her! In v15 the word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel to tell him that 'with one blow' God will take his wife from him. This will be a sudden, swift event that will shock the community. Even more startling is God's instruction to Ezekiel that he is to go on as normal – not missing a beat in following through on his God-given tasks. Ezekiel obeys God and addresses the people in the morning, and in the evening of the day that his wife died. Ezekiel is given no time to lament or weep. He keeps his grief to himself. He follows the instruction to refuse to eat the food that is offered to those who are in mourning. Just imagine how this looks to everyone else? It is God's intention that this event and Ezekiel's behaviour make a big impact on the Israelites. He is grabbing their attention because he wants them to know his power and to realise he means what he says. How intimately Ezekiel must have known God's power to have been sustained through this terrible event and to have been able to carry out God's instructions so effectively! God's plan works. Observing how Ezekiel acts through his grief does now communicate the message to the people. They want to learn now what it all means for them. **The message for the Israelites is this: just as Ezekiel has lost the delight of his eyes, so will they lose what they love most - Jerusalem and its Temple. And just as Ezekiel was permitted no time to mourn, neither will Israel.**

What can we learn from this chapter?

We cannot know God's will and God's intentions, all we know is that He loves us. God's purpose behind this event was, as we have seen, to bring his people back to him. With our limited knowledge and understanding we find the death of Ezekiel's wife a shocking and harsh thing to have happened.

It is reminiscent of the suffering of Job. We know from the first chapter of the book of Job that God describes him as this:

*'There is no-one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.'*

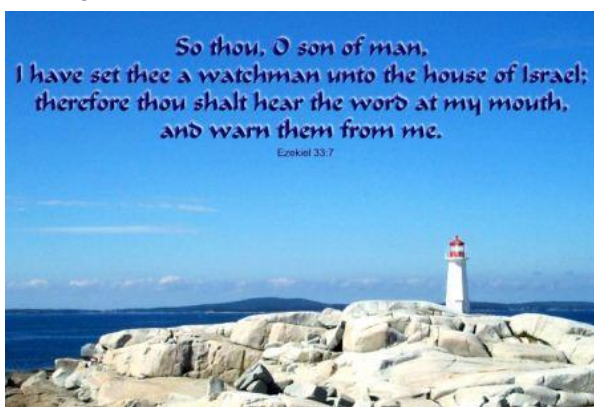
Clearly Job did not deserve to be punished. Job carried out his purpose to glorify God, not knowing that he was like a player in a drama. We do know Job suffered for a purpose, and tonight we see that just as Job lost his children as part of his testing, God takes Ezekiel's wife as part of his greater plan. We simply do not know the entire plan. What we do know however is that suffering is not confined to us. Ezekiel lost his wife, Job lost his children, and God sent his Son to the Cross when he was without sin. Christ's suffering was part of God's plan to allow us to be restored to a right relationship with him. When we weep, God weeps too.

Ezekiel's wife died to help bring the Israelites, or at least some of them, back into a right relationship with God. But it still took Christ's sacrifice on the Cross to allow them, as well as the rest of us believers, who would be exiles too, to be in a right relationship with God.

The challenge for us is to realise that we see things from our own limited human perspective. In the face of suffering and pain in our lives we must hold fast to the trust that God is working out his purposes in all things. God knows the suffering we feel, and we remember that God too suffered through his own Son's sacrifice to work out his plan. As the words of the hymn remind us: 'We do not know, we cannot tell what pain he had to bear, But we believe it was for us he hung and suffered there.' Amen.



### **Sunday Evening Service 8th July 2012 Derek Peat, Ezekiel 25-33 – 'Grasping The Glory Of God'**



Having last week taken us to the point where the Sovereign Lord begins to act to fulfil the prophecies Derek now turns our attention to 'making sense of the middle bit' of this challenging Book. From chapters 1 to 24 there have been the repeated calls to repentance and the prediction of the consequences of dishonouring God. Now the unthinkable is happening. Jerusalem has fallen and the Temple has been destroyed. Until now the Lord's outrage and judgment have been

directed at the Israelites. Because he loves them and desires to turn them back to himself he sets about clearing away everything that hampers their calling to be the people of God. He allows to be destroyed the object of their misguided love –the Temple – and at last the people are listening and paying heed.

In this next section the Lord turns his eye on all those countries surrounding Judah that have

gloated over the misfortunes of the Israelites. (The Book of Jeremiah Chapter 27 is helpful here. It has been by God's will and design that Babylon has destroyed Jerusalem. The kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon were told to submit to the power of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon because this was part of God's plan. It was not their role to question or seek to alter God's plan.)

Now God will deal with those who listened to false prophets and conspired with Babylon and who scoffed as the Temple was destroyed and God's people were subjugated. What these countries failed to appreciate was that Nebuchadnezzar's success and power had been allowed to build up by God. Nebuchadnezzar was God's instrument. Now what had been given by God is to be taken away by God and we find a nugget of hope and comfort for Israel in this. If their oppressor and his satellites are to be punished there must be some relief for Israel in prospect.

The people's view of Ezekiel now undergoes a change. His role, his behaviour, his visions and prophecies have been vindicated. The ranting madman is now seen in his true persona as God's prophet and the people gather together to discuss what God's will now is for their nation.

**How marvellous would it be if we Christians, God's people, were to gather together all across the land to ponder and discuss God's will for our nation!**

Ezekiel's job is not finished yet, though. God has more work for him among the people. Now that the people are prepared to listen, Ezekiel is to become their wake-up call to change the nature and focus of their fears. No longer should they fear Babylon – they should fear God who will not tolerate their persisting in sin. From now on they must take God (and Ezekiel his servant) more seriously. As for Ezekiel, his responsibilities remain to proclaim God's truth fervently and persistently otherwise the Lord will judge him severely.

**What can we learn from this 'middle bit' of Ezekiel?**

It is easy for us to grow dispirited and downhearted when we look around at the world's indifference to God's Word. Like the Israelites we can be tempted to lose hope – especially if we have been pinning our hopes on the wrong things! For the Israelites the fall of their Temple seemed like the end of their hopes of return to Jerusalem and their nationhood. But they were God's Chosen and God was still in control. They had to come to understand that salvation did not lie in ritual and in any kind of geographical identity. Their God was not only the God of Israel but of the whole universe. He is our God. For the Israelites this is not the end of everything – it is the end of their wrong understanding of God.

The lesson then for us too is that ritual - going through the motions of attending church regularly, partaking in Holy Communion, serving on the Kirk Session etc – ritual is not enough. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 commands us to be like Ezekiel – to be watchmen. We must tell every Christian in Scotland who thinks faith is a matter of ritual that God demands more. He wants all people to know he is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent.

This middle section of Ezekiel reveals that God has judged his people but that he will now save the repentant. It reveals too the transient nature of earthly power. God continues to speak through his prophets – let us therefore listen and pay heed.

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## Sunday Evening Service 15th July 2012, Kenneth Gray. Ezekiel 37:1-14 'Dry Bones Live'

This familiar passage is exciting and full of imagery and has many lessons we can apply to our own lives as Christians. This vivid image of the revival and resurrection of the dry bones presages the experience that will come to all who know and love Jesus Christ. Sceptics will,



of course, dismiss the whole idea of the resurrection of the body but Ezekiel 37 describes only a fraction of what God can and will do.

This passage tells us that God led him through the valley among the bones which can hardly have been something Ezekiel desired to do. No matter what natural squeamishness Ezekiel might have felt about tramping on the bones God knew what he intended to do next. We are told the bones are 'very dry' to emphasise their complete lifelessness.

No new life could possibly have clung to these bones without a special intervention by God. Next Ezekiel is told to 'prophesy to these bones'. Kenneth observed that ministers can occasionally be asked to do some strange things but never anything as strange as this. Ezekiel could not have carried out this instruction from God if he had had scepticism in his heart. Ever the obedient servant of the Sovereign Lord, Ezekiel does as commanded. Perhaps this is not so strange after all. Do we not pray when things seem impossible in human terms? Here God is turning things around and enabling Ezekiel to do 'the impossible' so that the Israelites will recognise and gain heart from the power of the Sovereign Lord.

Up to this point in his ministry Ezekiel has prophesied increasingly horrendous events and they have all come to pass. Now with the revival and resurrection of the dry bones God is demonstrating his readiness to restore the people of Israel. We must never underestimate the love God has for his own, his chosen people. He has chosen them to be the means of bringing salvation to the world. That is why the Evil One persists in trying to destroy them and lead them astray even to this very day. That is why anti-Semitism has never been completely eradicated in our world and remains so intense particularly in the middle east. Satan wants to destroy God's people so that he can frustrate God's plans.

By Chapter 37 the people are in despair but now God will build them up again and breathe new life into them.

**The lesson for the church is clear:** the church of Jesus Christ is, in places, like that valley of dry bones. We all know of churches which, if they are not quite dead, are certainly on 'life support'. A church can even present all the outward signs of life, for example smart signage advertising services and other activities, but its congregation might be so few in number as to be little more than a fellowship group.

Some people draw comfort from our own General Assembly finding the annual gathering a reaffirmation of the Kirk's strength of purpose and a reminder of the still significant numbers of its worshippers. This would be a legitimate source of comfort were the business of the Assembly to focus more on faith than on politics and were its behaviour more like the Body of Christ than merely another pressure group.

But as a church we **can** draw comfort and hope from the lesson of Ezekiel 37 that tells us

that however dried up, even dead a church might be God can still revive it, breathe new life into it and equip it for the job of saving souls.

**The lesson for us individually is also clear:** we can be like the dry bones. The joy, confidence, energy and enthusiasm that we had for the Gospel when we first became believers can begin to trickle away and drain out of us in face of the difficulties we encounter in the world. Like those dry bones we too can be revived by God. All we need is to spend more time in his presence.

Much is often made of evangelical books, inspirational seminars, and keynote speakers at conferences as sources of Christian revival. The thing to remember is that the transformation of lives comes from God alone and such books and events are simply the instruments He sometimes uses. There is no substitute for time spent in the presence of God and there is no book more 'inspirational' than the Bible itself. If as individuals we really want to know this revival in our hearts we need to allow God into our lives more. If we were to spend as much time with God as we do watching TV or pursuing hobbies we would allow God to make a big transformation in our lives.

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### **Sunday Evening Service 22nd July 2012, Kenneth Gray. Ezekiel 37:15-28 'One Nation Under One King'**



When we consider the Old Testament as a whole we may think of it as the story of a family that becomes the story of a nation. We could also describe the Old Testament as a story of grace and backsliding. The history of the Israelites is certainly characterised by periods of grace (obedience and closeness to God) alternating with periods of backsliding (willful disobedience and disregard for God's laws). Israel is a small nation yet it is fractured by division, despite all the things its people have in common.

Ezekiel's prophesy talks of unity not division This passage addresses the single overarching aspiration of the Jewish people – to be reunited and brought home. But Ezekiel's prophecy, spoken to this scattered and divided people, is not just about reuniting Judah and Israel. Nor when it talks about rebuilding the temple does it mean any physical temple. Herod rebuilt a temple but he was motivated by self glorification not by the desire to glorify God, so it did not last.

*'I will put my sanctuary among them'* is referring to the spiritual sanctuary that is Jesus Christ – where we can access God and come to find new life. The temple was always meant to be a place where the people could find God and lay their sins before Him. Now the Christ would be the great High Priest, the bridge between the sinful, fallen people and the Sovereign Lord – and not just for the Jews but for all people, all nations.

The people will be reunited under one king, from the House of David, Jesus, who will be their Shepherd. How sad it is that this prophecy has not yet been fulfilled for the Jews who have

not had a king since Ezekiel's time and who have failed to recognise the King of kings. Let us continue to pray for the restoration of Israel which is inextricably linked to the Second Coming and hope to witness the Jews coming in ever increasing numbers to the Christian faith.

Kenneth referred to a recent incident he had observed that had so succinctly illustrated the Good Shepherd nature of Jesus. Driving through Wensleydale his progress and that of many other motorists had been halted by the blocking of the main road by hundreds of sheep. On seeing the vast numbers of animals he anticipated a lengthy delay. However, the 2 farmers and 2 sheepdogs in charge of the flock expertly shepherded the sheep from one pasture to another across the road in just 2 or 3 minutes. It had been 'poetry in motion' and a sight to behold.

We need to learn what it means to have the Lord as our Shepherd. When sheep follow the shepherd's lead everything goes according to plan. It is only when one or two sheep decide to go their own way that difficulties arise and other sheep get led astray until the shepherd takes control again.

When the Jews asked God for a king He gave them Saul and later David. Both were great kings initially but then went astray and led the people astray. We get to choose our rulers in the UK but no sooner have we elected our politicians than we are criticising them and wanting them out of office as soon as possible. That's because we quickly find they have feet of clay, they disappoint us and dash our hopes and expectations.

It is our mission as Christians to talk to people about the King of kings. We must tell the world how wonderful, faithful, forgiving and loving is this Jesus Christ, the King of Heaven. It is unsurprising that many people do not believe us – these are not the characteristics of authority figures that they recognise or have experienced.

*'They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees'* prophesies Ezekiel. What a different world will it be when this comes to pass. As human beings we cannot seem to keep even the simplest rules at times. We must also recognise that we can hardly expect the world to keep God's laws if we in the church do not keep them.

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**Sunday Evening Service 29th July 2012 - Jack McHugh. Ezekiel 38:1-16 & 43:1-12 'The Glory of the Lord Restored'**



In this final study of the book of Ezekiel we find the prophet still vigorous in his service to the Sovereign Lord and not in any way jaded by his 20 years ministering to the exiled people. In chapters 38 and 39 God describes how he will deal with the implacable enemies of his chosen people and how his will shall be triumphant.

In Chapters 40-48 we receive a foretelling of the restoration of the temple, the land and the people once the glory of God has returned. The awesome magnificence of the glory of God will be so powerful that the people will have to be 'insulated' from it.

Hence the extensive descriptions of the configuration of the temple, the design of which will

protect the people from the presence of Yaweh.

How different for us who have been offered such easy access to the Lord through prayer, having been gifted the grace of Jesus Christ, our only intermediary, to protect us and to save us from ourselves! With this privilege to enjoy we must continually reflect on whether our actions and our behaviour towards others mirror the gracious love of Jesus.

Chapter 38 describes the defeat of Gog – every human and satanic enemy opposed to the one true God. Yaweh will be controlling events. The rout of God's enemies will be so comprehensive that it will take the Israelites 7 months to dispose of the corpses and they will be using their enemies' weapons for fuel for 7 years. We are reminded of Revelation 20 where God's glory will be revealed and His truth vindicated. The power of Jesus will defeat Satan and God will dwell with his people. At the Second Coming no temple will be needed as all the saints will worship the Lamb in heaven.

Ezekiel is transported in spirit on a detailed tour of Yaweh's empty palace in advance of the King's return from the east. If Yaweh is to dwell there among his people they will have to change their ways and return to the Lord's ways. The repeated emphasis is on the magnificence of the Glory of God and the reverence and respect it commands.

In chapter 43 the Sovereign Lord declares; ' Now let them put away their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings, and I will live among them for ever.'

This is a timely reminder that God deserves our reverence. If we are ever too self assured and too casual in our attitude towards God we must change our ways. If we give God our lives and our heartfelt worship he will give us his Son Jesus as our Saviour. God still desires to have a relationship with his people.

In Ezekiel we are reminded that holiness is an awesome, dangerous element from which sinners need to be protected. Chapters 42 & 44 describe the accommodation and detailed procedures for priests. Their role is to undertake duties in the sanctuary and to be intermediaries between the people and Yaweh instructing them in how to distinguish between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean. For some the duties will focus on God himself – for others the duties will be about looking after the practical needs of the people.

As Christians we too appoint leaders. The role of leadership in the Christian church has been described as 'comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable'. James alerts us to the risks of leadership '...we who teach will be judged more strictly' James 3:1. God has given us all a mission – to bring people to him and never to lead people astray. We are all called to a kind of priesthood.

We should rejoice and be glad that our Heavenly Father is committed to his children and he welcomes us back if he finds repentance and honesty in our hearts. We also need to show that same love and forgiveness to others in our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our families. That is the work God is calling us to do.

Christians in Scotland have a difficult time ahead. In our licentious society we will have to find ways to hate the sin whilst continuing to love the sinner. In order to make a proper response to imminent legislation, such as that concerning same sex marriage, we must be sure about what we believe, how as Christians we should be living, what God is saying in his

Word.

It is the same for us as it was for Ezekiel. We must separate ourselves from the morally questionable and the clearly sinful but remain committed to and concerned for the people in Bridge of Weir and across our land of Scotland and help them come to recognise the one true God.

