



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers  
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 33**

**EZEKIEL**

**AUGUST 13-17, 2007**

| <b>DAY</b>       | <b><i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i></b> | <b><i>ABBREVIATED STUDY</i></b>              |
|------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Monday</b>    | Ezekiel 21-25, Psalm 11         | Ezekiel 1:1 – 2:7, Psalm 11                  |
| <b>Tuesday</b>   | Ezekiel 26-30, Psalm 12         | Ezekiel 8, Psalm 12                          |
| <b>Wednesday</b> | Ezekiel 31-35, Psalm 13         | Ezekiel 34, Psalm 13                         |
| <b>Thursday</b>  | Ezekiel 36-39, Psalm 14         | Ezekiel 39:1-24, Psalm 14                    |
| <b>Friday</b>    | Ezekiel 40-48, Psalm 15         | Ezekiel 40:1-19, 47:1-12, 48:30-35; Psalm 15 |



## READ

Ezekiel 1:1 - 2:7

Psalm 11

## REFLECT

Ezekiel is the third of the “major prophets,” and presents us with a large book of prophecies, varied in content and style. He wrote at a specific time, addressing a very particular situation in the history of Israel. In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem, and took 8,000 leading citizens to Babylon as hostages (2 Kings 24:1-17). He also took as captive the king who had just begun to reign, Jehoiakim, and appointed Zedekiah as the client “king” to rule his stead. But Zedekiah soon revolted (despite the warnings of Jeremiah) and so in 587 BC Nebuchadnezzar returned to destroy Jerusalem and to burn the Temple to the ground (2 Kings 25:1-21). Thus the year 586 BC marks the end of the “old kingdom,” and the end of the political rule of the line of David.

Ezekiel was one of the 8,000 who was deported in 597. Until the final destruction of his city in 586 he consistently prophesied warning that the Lord’s wrath was not yet spent. Chapters 1-24 represent his relentless preaching during this time against the sins of the people and the leaders, with one or two brief words of encouragement. The passage of these years is marked by his references to dates, and in 24:1-2 he records the day of the final siege of the city. Then in chapters 25-32 Ezekiel turns his attention to the nations surrounding Judah, again warning of God’s wrath. The mood changes dramatically in chapters 33-48, as Ezekiel records several visions and prophecies promising God’s redemption and renewal. A prophet of doom until doom was enacted, Ezekiel then became a prophet of deep and vibrant hope.

Today’s passage describes his call to be a prophet. (1:1-2 are usually interpreted as dating it to his own thirtieth year, and the fifth year

of his exile, 593 BC.) The amazingly visual vision (which today would get a nod for “great special effects”) affirms that the God of Israel is able to establish His presence and throne even in Babylon, away from the Temple of His habitation. The images express power, dynamism, holiness, and sovereign will; it is these same attributes that are expressed in 2:1-7 in the terms of God’s call to Ezekiel. Before God, Ezekiel is just a “son of man” (read “mere mortal”), empowered by God’s Spirit and otherwise pretty much as commanding as a wet noodle. The word given to Ezekiel *must* be preached, “whether they listen or not” (2:5). Later in chapter 33, some of this will be reiterated, with the warning that if the prophet does *not* preach what he is given, the wrath will return on his own head (33:1-9, esp. v.6). These stern words about the necessity of proclaiming God’s word *according to its own authenticity* have energized the thinking, and stiffened the resolve, of generations of ministers and preachers.

## RESPOND

The vision of the presence of the Lord must have been a great comfort to Ezekiel; it is a theme sounded throughout the book (see the last verse!). Psalm 11 represents the corresponding assurance of the presence of the Lord in the Temple built at His command. On the other hand, nothing in either picture limits God’s powers or presence anywhere: “His throne is in heaven; His eyes behold and His eyelids test all the sons of men” (Psalm 11:4). As Christians we have the promise of His presence as we worship, as we gather in His name, as we ask Him to dwell with us, as we seek Him in His word and in prayer. Perhaps our increased access in Christ has given us a “domesticated” perspective on God’s presence; if so, Ezekiel can refresh us with a deeper insight.

## PRAY

Thank you today, Lord, for Your presence, which sanctifies us, and Your word, which challenges us and helps us to grow.

- D.D.

**READ**

Ezekiel 8

Psalm 12

**REFLECT**

Today's passage is the first part of a vision (ch. 8-11) in which Ezekiel is taken by the Spirit from his home in Babylon to behold secret, evil practices in Jerusalem hundreds of miles across the desert. He is then told to declare these things together with the fact that God will bring final punishment on Jerusalem and Israel for these sins.

The opening of the vision reiterates the characteristic relationship between God and Ezekiel: God comes in like a freight train, interrupting Ezekiel's conversation with the elders, and grabbing Ezekiel "by a lock of my head." He transports him "in the visions of God" to Jerusalem to disclose to him the "abominations" of the elders of Israel. The beautiful outshining of the glory of the sovereign and holy God, hovering over the city and the Temple, is the foil for what Ezekiel is forced to see and report.

First is the "idol of jealousy" set up in the Temple (8:3), apparently an image of the Canaanite goddess Asherah, one of which was actually installed by Manasseh (2 Kings 21:7) and later destroyed by Josiah (2 Kings 23:6); there is evidence that some tried to teach Israel that she was the consort of the Lord. Then going from this open blasphemy, God instructs Ezekiel to dig into inner chambers of the Temple, where elders stand worshiping amidst images of "all kinds of creeping things and detestable animals." God asks him, "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images?" (8:10, 12). Thirdly Ezekiel is shown the women of the Temple, who however are engaged in the annual lament for the hero-god Tammuz or Adonis, a legend imported from "the north" (8:14); each year the dead hero was worshiped as reborn with the Spring. And finally at the altar he sees a group of men worshiping the

rising sun "with their backs to the Temple of the Lord" (8:16). All of this recalls the language of Paul in Romans 1:21-23; though they knew God, instead of honoring Him "they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God" for worship of the images in human and animal form. For Paul this described the essence of sin itself: the refusal to acknowledge God as God.

And so, says the Lord, "therefore I will deal in wrath" (8:18). The vision continues in chapter 9 with the slaughter of the Jerusalemites, and in chapter 10 with the burning of the city itself in the imagery of priestly ritual cleaning (10:2); and God in His glory departs from the Temple (10:18). The vision, however, ends with a deeply moving promise of restoration; the Lord will bring salvation and stability by a spiritual transformation of His people beginning from the inside out (11:19-20). Once again, it is hard to imagine any such transformation except on the terms that it will come in the New Testament: the death and resurrection of Jesus breaking the power of sin, and the outpouring of the Spirit bringing the reality of new life inside each of us.

**RESPOND**

For anyone, the prospect of the ruthless disclosure of private sins is very threatening. In this vision, however, we are reminded that God's intimate knowledge of and grief over human sins is the beginning of our freedom. His love and truth does not come to us on idealistic clouds far above the harsh realities of life. Rather His love comes with the force of a freight train, scattering everything that opposes it, and rescuing us from deepest bondage. This is the power of the saving God: He *actually* saves.

**PRAY**

Dear Lord, thank you for the promise in today's Psalm:

"Because of the devastation of the afflicted, because of the groaning of the needy, now I will arise," says the Lord; "I will set him in the safety for which he longs." (Psalm 12:5)

- D.D.

**READ**

Ezekiel 34

Psalm 13

**REFLECT**

Today's passage is the first in Ezekiel's book of consolation (ch. 34-48). The chapter begins with a condemnation of the leaders of Israel, but continues with the news that God Himself will take up the role that they have abused. Throughout the chapter Ezekiel uses the metaphor of sheep and shepherds to make his point.

Here Ezekiel, in addressing the current problems of the leadership of Israel, uses language that is so rich and evocative that, with its echoes and recollections, it seems to open up the whole of the Scriptural witness. In verses 1-6, he condemns the irresponsibility of the "shepherds of Israel" for feeding only themselves, for neglecting the needs of their charges, and for scattering them where "there was no one to search or seek after them." The description of the rulers of Israel as shepherds goes far back into Israel's history; in fact we do well to remember that Jacob learned leadership through the lessons of shepherding (Genesis 30:25-43), and Moses also was restored to the values of his Abrahamic heritage, and was cleansed of the urban impatience of his youth, by learning shepherding from Jethro (Exodus 2:11 – 3:1). Good shepherds, apparently, have much to offer others; bad shepherds apparently don't have much in the way of redeeming value.

And so God declares that He Himself will initiate and sustain the shepherding of Israel, in the days of restoration. All the care neglected by the former shepherds (34:4) God will now provide and accomplish (34:12). He will attend to them, gather them, feed and water them, and lead them. It is almost impossible not to hear the phrases of Psalm 23 in these passages: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . . ." Likewise Isaiah 40:11, familiar in Handel's music: "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; He shall gather the lambs in His arms . . . ." But

also unavoidable for Christians are the many images that come to us in the Gospels, of Jesus gathering the people to Himself, of feeding them with bread and fish, of healing and comforting them, of teaching them of the love of God: "Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). This passage of Ezekiel acts like a hypertext calling us from Genesis to Revelation. (Where in Revelation? How about 7:17?)

This passage is unusual, however, in all of Scripture, for the way it describes the Shepherd's work *within* the flock. This is a group that has been harmed by poor leadership to the point that there are severe discrepancies of justice within the flock itself. And so, in an image contrary to normal husbandry, the Lord declares that He will destroy the fat and strong sheep (34:16), since by their inordinate size they show that they have taken unfair advantage of the others. The Lord's displeasure, then, with irresponsible leadership continues to be felt, until He has made everything right, and a "covenant of peace" can characterize the life of the flock of God (34:25, 31).

**RESPOND**

Christianity sees not only Jesus, but also our ministers, in shepherding roles; the word "pastor" derives from the Latin for "shepherd." We would be wrong, though, to hear this passage as directed only to religious leaders. We all bear leadership roles – in family, in relationships with friends, in employment, in lay and professional Christian connections, in local community life, and in our national and global responsibilities as well ("We the People . . ."). To all of us comes the precious promise in this passage that the Lord initiates and sustains good leadership, the leadership that can represent His Lordship and His peace. In all our responsibilities, He is here: to teach, and lead, and bless, and shepherd.

**PRAY**

[I suggest Psalm 23 as our prayer today.]

- D.D.

**READ**

Ezekiel 39:1-24

Psalm 14

**REFLECT**

Chapters 38-39 of Ezekiel (of which today's passage is a section) depict one aspect of Israel's "hope" that is in fact very violent and even grisly. It is the attack of Gog, king of Magog, on the land of Israel, prompted by the Lord. The battle results in the destruction of the armies of Gog and the vindication of Israel. Since Ezekiel is writing before the land of Israel is restored in power and sovereignty, all of this lies in the distant future; in fact it looks like a "last battle."

One of the questions this passage raises is, "Who is Gog?" Well, he is the king of the land called "Magog." But beyond that, commentators and scholars finally admit to ignorance. If Ezekiel had someone specific in mind in his day, that reference is lost to us in the mists of time. On the other hand, Gog's function in this passage seems clear: he is the embodiment of all the nations that ever rose against Israel and insulted her God. This is especially convincing as we read the prophecies of Ezekiel against the nations (chapters 25-32); the same language of wrath is expressed there. It is part of the consolation of Israel that her God has never taken these insults lightly, nor forgotten them; each insult will receive full repayment in the wrath of God. Even though God has made use of these nations to discipline His own people, yet their inherent violence, and especially their arrogance, will receive measure for measure, and more.

And Israel will be the instrument of His punishment of them. God will put hooks into the mouth of Gog (38:4) and drag him to the mountains of Israel (39:2) in order to defeat and destroy him there. In this battle, the slaughter will be immense (39:17-20), and the victory will be final (39:21). Two purposes for this carnage are given in our text, in 39:21-22: "And I

shall set My glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see My judgments which I have executed, and My hand which I have laid on them. And the house of Israel will know that I am Yahweh their God from that day onward."

The two purposes are that "the nations shall see," and that "Israel shall know." That double intent is also an old theme, echoed in the purpose of the Exodus itself. Exodus 14, the account of the parting of the Red Sea, says at verse 4 that the purpose of the massive miracle is that "the Egyptians will know that I am Lord." But once it is done, at verse 31, we read that "when Israel saw the great power which the Lord had used . . . , they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses." It seems that the Lord always had as much to prove to Israel as to the other nations. But between the Exodus and the battle with Gog, the stakes have become global.

Is this battle yet in the future? Revelation 20:8-10 depicts it as still to come, as a final conflict, though the details are few aside from the assurance of the Lord's total victory. Those who see the Lord's work as a continual growth of peace and justice find little to love in such a violent prophecy. But Ezekiel speaks to a more turbulent reality, in which outrages are not just forgotten but addressed. And as they are addressed, the Lord brings about His own closure, and a new future can bloom.

**RESPOND**

Psalm 14 begins, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" As Christians who have come to know God's peace, we can easily miss the stress and even the violence that can characterize the lives of folk who know nothing of God. God knows violence, and has sent His Son into violence, in order that we might truly be ambassadors of His peace – real peace. May He use us today to bring peace.

**PRAY**

Thank You for the peace we know in you, Lord, and for the power of that peace as the hope of the world.

- D.D.

**READ**

Ezekiel 40:1-19; 47:1-12; and 48:30-35

Psalms 15

**REFLECT**

The final vision in Ezekiel covers the last nine chapters (40-48). It transfers us into a completely different atmosphere, unique in the OT, dominated by precise measurements and exact behavior. It can be further divided into three sections: 40-43 describes the carefully-measured restored Temple; 44-46 gives the regulations ordering the new Temple worship; and 47-48 directs the distribution of the land of Israel among the restored tribes. The first passage for today's reading comes from the first section; the second reading is a transitional passage between the second and third sections; and the third reading closes the book.

Readers who start into chapter 40 are likely to have a number of reactions, most of them unexpected. The sheer regularity of the content can be soothing, but the point of it all is not immediately clear. This is not really a blueprint for rebuilding the destroyed Temple; it doesn't say, "Thou shalt build the wall thus and so." Rather it seems to be a tour of an existing building, with the measurements demonstrating something like perfection itself. Commentaries include maps of the building so described, and though they have a certain fascination, they hold no further solution, DaVinci Code-like, to the interpretation of the vision. They describe a building that is both like and unlike the original Temple. Nevertheless the sheer accumulation of detail has its tantalizing appeal; one would like to know what it "means." And the same impression is given by the second section on the regulations of the Temple, and by the third on the ordering of the tribes in the land.

Perhaps these really are just instructions for the rebuilding of the Temple. If so, they were not followed by those who built the Second Temple, that existed in Jesus' day. Some would say that this is the

blueprint of a Temple to be rebuilt in the future in Jerusalem; but if so, its foundations and the walls of the city that are to surround it would require the demolition of most of modern Jerusalem. For such reasons biblical scholars have looked for other kinds of intention on the part of Ezekiel in recording this vision. Perhaps most satisfying is the suggestion that as a "priestly" prophet Ezekiel saw the perfect kingdom of God in descriptions of this kind: a perfect Temple, run perfectly by a priest-king, in a perfectly ordered nation.

The depiction of the stream issuing from the altar (47:1-12) likewise has much that catches our imagination, but little that satisfies even diligent curiosity. The measurements of its increasing depths do not correlate with the dimensions of the Jerusalem topography as it has existed since antiquity; rather there seems to be intended here a message of God's overabundant grace. Readers of the NT will recall the promise of Jesus: "He who believes in Me, as the Scriptures said, from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water." (John 7:38) Oddly, there is no OT verse that says just that; Jesus may have been interpreting our Ezekiel passage as a promise of powerful personal renewal. The theme appears again in Revelation 22:1-2, where "a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb" clearly brings both personal and "kingdom" renewal and healing.

What is the meaning of such passages? I submit that the fascination we feel is itself part of the meaning; something wonderful is being described, that we only begin to grasp. But God's holy beauty, and His success in involving us with Himself in it, is no mean message, and may give us a peg on which to hang other impressions and insights.

**PRAY**

"O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell in Thy holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart" (Psalm 15:1-2). May the water of Your life spring up within us, Lord, today and each day.

- D.D.