

Introduction:

- A. First, we need an Old Testament timeline. 2000 BC – Abraham; 1500 BC—Moses; 1000 BC—David; 0—Jesus. Now where does Ezekiel fit? In the years around 600 BC. Ezekiel’s story involves Babylon, the great power of that day, 900 miles from Jerusalem in modern day Iraq.
- B. I’d like you to imagine that all these people on my right represent the population in and around Jerusalem in **605 BC**. The Jewish king made a serious mistake. He ticked off the wrong guy—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He dispatched his raiders who swept into Jerusalem. They took treasures from God’s temple and they captured many of the royal family and other nobles, including **Daniel**, who was about 15 years old, along with his three friends. 18-year-old **Ezekiel** was there too but he wasn’t taken. *(So out of our group here we send the young people with great ACT scores and the relatives of Judah’s stupid king.)*
- C. Thirteen years pass. The Jews were a vassal state of Babylon but they had their own king named Jehoichin, who was only 18 and already a fool! He also ticks off Nebuchadnezzar and in **597 BC** Nebuchadnezzar returns and this time he’s not messing around! He lays siege to Jerusalem but the Jewish king rolls over quickly and the Babylonians round up 10,000 Jews, including Ezekiel, and send them packing into exile in Babylon. The only people left were poor and weak, left behind to tend to the fields and vineyards. Among those left behind was the prophet **Jeremiah**. He and Ezekiel were sort of prophetic twins—God’s Pete and Re-Pete—bringing pretty much the same declarations to the Jews again and again. *(So let’s imagine now that no one’s left in this section except the riff-raff.)*

D. Nine years pass and the exiles begin to settle down in Babylon. They miss home, to be sure, but they don't get much news, and they settle in. **Jeremiah had told them they'd be exiled 70 years** before God would allow them to return. Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, the puppet king Zedekiah, really, *really* ticks off Nebuchadnezzar II and this time when Nebby comes, in **588 BC**, the Jews lock the gates and don't come out for *two years!* It is a classic siege. Nothing going in, no one coming out. Food runs out. Things get very ugly.

Then in 586 the Babylonians broke through the walls and utterly annihilated the remaining Jews. Blood ran in the streets. The Babylonians looted the Temple and burned it, the palace and every other building. They also tore down Jerusalem's walls. No more sieges! The whole country was now desolate. Any survivors were hiding in caves. Even wild animals threatened them.

E. Of course, 900 miles across the desert the exiles didn't know what was happening. But on the very day that the siege of Jerusalem had started, **Ezekiel's wife had died.** The Bible says she was "*the delight of his eyes.*" But that wasn't all. God laid a hard demand upon Ezekiel. God told him that **he could not mourn.** According to **Ez. 24** the people asked him, "*Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us? Why are you acting like this?*"

So I said to them, "The word of the Lord came to me: Say to the people of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary—the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword. And you will do as I have done. You will not cover your mustache

and beard or eat the customary food of mourners. You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves. Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.'

But the LORD also told Ezekiel,

"And you, son of man, on the day I take away their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, their heart's desire, and their sons and daughters as well—on that day a fugitive will come to tell you the news. At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the Lord."

From that point on, by God's doing, Ezekiel was mute. Not a word from God's prophets as the months passed with no news, and not a word from God. Then the day came.

- F. Then on Jan 5, 585 BC an escapee from the destruction in Jerusalem finally makes it to Babylon with the news. All was lost. Their city was utterly destroyed. No one was left. Their land was desolated. It was a gut punch to the exiles. **And yet, just as Ezekiel had prophesied, they were strangely unmoved. They didn't mourn.** (Though they would later.) Their spiritual sensibilities had become so calloused not even the destruction of *"their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, their heart's desire, and their sons and daughters as well"* phased them.
- G. So Ezekiel had his prophetic work cut out for him. Now turn to **Ezek 33:21-22**... That night, before the escapee arrived, God gave Ezekiel his next sermons, his prophesies for the exiles. It was high time they learned to listen to

God! What follows here and in the next several chapters are the messages God gave Ezekiel to say to the exiles.

First, in **vv.23-29** he tells them again what this terrible defeat meant by taking them back to the situation in Jerusalem... [v.25 condemns their idolatry; v.26 condemns their violence and immorality.] Now what does that have to do with us?

I. BEWARE OF PRESUMING ON GOD (33:23-29)

- A. As the years had passed, the riff-raff left in Jerusalem had begun to think of themselves as better than all those exiles. They began to think of the land they were tending as *theirs*. Not only theirs, but theirs by *right*. If Abraham could have this land, and he was just one person, surely they had a right to it, being his descendants, and being many. So they were banking on a kind of twisted covenant with God.

“This land is mine. God gave this land to me.”

But they were oblivious to the facts. God’s prophets had said again and again that the land and city would be conquered because of sin. Not because Nebuchadnezzar was stronger, but because God wouldn’t put up with them anymore. **God most certainly did not owe them his blessing nor the land!**

- B. The irony was that those people left in and around Jerusalem had faith when they shouldn’t have had it! **Sin kicks the legs out from under faith.** Faith and hope are pointless unless they bind us in trust and obedience to the LORD. You hear people all the time say, *“You just gotta have faith.”* You see these plaques, *“Believe.”* Don’t be silly. **Faith in God only works if we obey God.**
- C. In effect, Ezekiel would say to the exiles, *“This terrible destruction wasn’t because of Nebuchadnezzar’s might, nor are we here in exile because Babylon is stronger than*

Israel. This is all because of our sin. Let what happened to our relatives in Jerusalem be your wake-up call! We have lost possession of our land, and suffered the destruction of our city—“the delight of our eyes”—because we would not repent and serve the LORD. Can you hear me now!?”

- D. Brothers and sisters, for us, here and now, we also must beware of presuming on God. We have a spiritual advantage Ezekiel and the exiles didn't have. We know Jesus. But we must not ever presume that God owes us his blessing. Rather, we owe him our loving obedience. When people who professed to be Christians would not leave their sin, Paul wrote in **1 Cor. 6:9-11**, *“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”*

Well, I bet Ezekiel had their attention now! But listen to what God told him in **vv.31-33...** This is one of those *what's-wrong-with-this-picture* situations. Most of the time God's prophets couldn't get an audience, at least not one that really listened. But these exiles couldn't wait to hear Ezekiel, especially after his long silence. He was their spiritual leader. *“I could listen to that guy all day,”* they'd say. *“Ezekiel has such a way with words!”* they'd say. *“His words are music to our ears,”* they'd say. Maybe they said, *“We just love it when you sing the benediction!”*

II. BEWARE OF BEING HEARERS OF GOD'S WORD BUT NOT DOERS (33:31-33)

- A. That's what James said. He said that people who listen to what God says but don't change are like people who look in the mirror but don't fix their appearance. Jesus asked, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" [Mt 7:21]
- B. It is dangerous to listen to the preaching of God's word, and no less dangerous to preach it. Because we bear the responsibility to practice what we hear preached. **Christopher Wright** said, "*Enthusiasm has always been easier than obedience.*"
- C. The only reason to listen to God's preachers and prophets is to put God's words into practice. To begin with, we must let God's Word measure and weigh us. To say, as we listen, "*Search me, God, and know my heart... See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*" [Ps 139:23-24] *Illus.:* I was visiting with my friend Irma at Einsteins. She's a Catholic believer and was telling me how much she admired the humility of a certain priest. I showed her **Is 57:15** where God says:

*"I live in a high and holy place,
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

She loved that verse and wrote down the reference. Then she said, "*Every day I try to cut the heads off my highness,*" (flashing an imaginary knife), "*like Medusa.*"

Once we're repentant and humble, we weigh what we need to do to obey God. It may be a different attitude or a new way of thinking. Maybe we simply need to meditate on an idea. It might even be to believe something

wonderful that we have never really owned. But whatever it is, we need to practice what God preaches.

If we don't, God will find stronger ways to be sure we realize that his words from his spokespeople are not just pretty music.

There's something going on behind the scenes of this story that I haven't mentioned yet. While these exiles seemed to spiritual hearing aids, **there was hope for them.** Ezekiel knew what his colleague, Jeremiah, had reported. In Jeremiah 24, God likened the Israelites to two baskets of figs. The ones left in Jerusalem were good-for-nothing bad figs but the exiles in Babylon were a basket of good figs. Apparently the hard discipline of the exile was accomplishing a slow change of hearts. **Jer. 24:4-7** says,

*This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. **I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord.** They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.*

III. GOD'S MESSAGE TO US, NO MATTER HOW STERN, IS ALWAYS GROUNDED IN GRACE

A. When we humble ourselves before God and set about doing what he tells us to do and thinking what he tells us to think, he is eager to bless our lives in profound and enduring ways. In the chapters to come God details for the exiles the ways in which he plans to bless them, and through Christ, how he will bless us:

1. Instead of wicked, self-serving shepherds God will give us a Good Shepherd

2. Instead of being at the mercy of our mortal enemies God will defeat them.
 3. Instead of exile we will have a great homecoming
 4. Instead of being a dead nation—nothing but dry bones—a new nation will rise up and live.
 5. Instead of being scattered and kingless, we will be one nation under one King.
- B. God had also promised Jeremiah, in **Jer. 29:10-14**, *This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. **For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”*

Conclusion

Have my words this morning just been music to your ears? Just entertainment? Are you listening? Could God say to us, “*they hear your words but do not put them into practice*”?

Some here, perhaps many of us, are presuming on God. No warning really gets through. *We’ll be okay. God will forgive; that’s his business.* Do you ever stop to “*cut the heads of your highness?*” Our hearts are unmoved. Remember what Jesus said to one church in **Rev. 3:15-16**, “*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So,*

because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” If this is you, **repent!** Here and now!

Are you a hearer but rarely a doer of God’s word? Right now, this week, where are you stretching to obey God? Where is your personal spiritual frontier of holiness? Are you drawing on the Holy Spirit’s life and help to serve Jesus? Do you “*have a heart to know the Lord*”?

God has plans for you as surely as he did for those exiles, ***plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.***” But we must turn to him with all our hearts. Do not presume upon God. Do not merely listen to God’s word like music but never do what he says.