

Ezekiel 4

- We're now ready to move into the next major section of the book of Ezekiel
 - Let's revisit where we've been so far and where we're going
 - We just finished the first section of the book, chapters 1-3
 - In those chapters, Ezekiel told us how he came to be a prophet, the circumstances and the circumstances of Israel in captivity
 - Ezekiel's job description was remarkably simple yet challenging
 - Ezekiel was to be a watchman for Israel
 - He was speak to the people as God directed, speaking only when God tells him to speak
 - He wasn't to be concerned with the peoples' response, one way or the other
 - God said some would listen, most would not, but regardless, Ezekiel was to speak faithfully
 - We also learned that Ezekiel's mission would exact a considerable toll on the prophet
 - He was called to forgo a normal life among the people so that he could serve God in a dramatic fashion
 - He would live sequestered in his own home
 - The Lord even made Ezekiel mute so he could speak only in circumstances when the Lord specifically directed
- That brings us to the first prophecy the Lord asks Ezekiel to deliver
 - In chapters 4-24, the Lord warns Israel repeatedly of a coming destruction of their beloved city, Jerusalem
 - God's initial warning comes in chapters 4-7
 - Today, we study the first chapter of that section, chapter 4
 - But as you will soon see, this warning begins in a most curious manner
 - God doesn't ask Ezekiel to speak to Israel

- Which means Ezekiel remains completely silent during the first stage of this prophecy
- So if Ezekiel can't speak, how does he issue his first warning to Israel?
- I'm glad you asked...

Ezek. 4:1 “Now you son of man, get yourself a brick, place it before you and inscribe a city on it, Jerusalem.

Ezek. 4:2 “Then lay siege against it, build a siege wall, raise up a ramp, pitch camps and place battering rams against it all around.

Ezek. 4:3 “Then get yourself an iron plate and set it up as an iron wall between you and the city, and set your face toward it so that it is under siege, and besiege it. This is a sign to the house of Israel.

Ezek. 4:4 “As for you, lie down on your left side and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel on it; you shall bear their iniquity for the number of days that you lie on it.

Ezek. 4:5 “For I have assigned you a number of days corresponding to the years of their iniquity, three hundred and ninety days; thus you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Israel.

Ezek. 4:6 “When you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side and bear the iniquity of the house of Judah; I have assigned it to you for forty days, a day for each year.

Ezek. 4:7 “Then you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem with your arm bared and prophesy against it.

Ezek. 4:8 “Now behold, I will put ropes on you so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have completed the days of your siege.

- Intrigued? Confused? If so, that's not surprising, because we've dropped into a game of charades
 - Before the internet and video games, charades used to be a common party game
 - One person draws a slip of paper from a bowl with a word or phrase written on the paper
 - Then without speaking, the person acts out the meaning of the word while everyone else tries to guess the answer
 - This is essentially what God has asked Ezekiel to do in public before Israel
 - Ezekiel acting out a prophecy before Israel

- And this is no game, for the events he depicts are a very serious matter
- They foretell great destruction coming to Israel for their sin under the Old Covenant
- Now to succeed at a game of charades, it helps to know a couple of things
 - First, you need to understand the symbols a person uses to communicate
 - In the game, you can hold up fingers to indicate how many words are in the phrase or how many syllables are in a word
 - You can also cup your hand to your ear to indicate you are miming a word that “sounds like” the actual answer
 - Secondly, you need to understand a little about culture and history
 - If someone is miming the phrase “A Hard Day’s Night,” you probably won’t guess the answer unless you have some understanding of 1960’s pop music
 - Or if someone is acting out the word “water” followed by the word “gate,” you probably won’t get it unless you know American presidential politics
 - So if we’re going to understand Ezekiel’s charade, we need to understand a few things about the symbols and Israel’s history
 - To help you follow all this, I’ve prepared a simple handout to accompany this lesson
 - You can mark a few points next to the pictures (*downloadable on the Ezekiel Study page at www.vbvmi.org*)
- Let’s start with the first part of the charade that the Lord asks Ezekiel to perform
 - In v.1 the Lord asks Ezekiel to find a brick and inscribe Jerusalem on it
 - In Babylon, bricks were made of clay mud and straw to bind the clay together and varied in size, but they could be quite large
 - The Hebrew word for brick is also the word for tablet or pavement
 - When used to inscribe things in the way the Lord commands here, the tablets were usually about 2 feet long by 1 foot wide

- This brick or tablet is inscribed with a depiction of the city of Jerusalem
 - Notice in v.1 the Lord commands Ezekiel to inscribe a city on it, not to inscribe the name of the city
 - Perhaps Ezekiel drew an outline of the city walls and pools and the temple compound
 - Whatever he did, it would have been immediately recognizable as a model of the city to any passing exile
- Then the Lord commands Ezekiel in v.2 to set up a small battle scene around the brick city
 - He is to erect an enemy's camp around the brick, build a little siege wall, a ramp, and battering rams
 - Ezekiel creates a miniature battlefield around the brick as if playing toy soldiers
- The first part of Ezekiel's charade is easy to understand
 - The brick and the accompanying siege-works represent the Babylonian siege of the city of Jerusalem
 - Remember at this time, Ezekiel and his brethren are sitting in captivity in Babylon
 - Judah has already been conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
 - These exiles have already witnessed a siege much like the one Ezekiel is depicting
 - But history records that Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem a total of three times over 19 years
 - The first time in 605 BC the city of Jerusalem was taken and many of the citizens taken prisoner including the prophet Daniel
 - The Babylonian king allowed some Jews to remain and installed a new king to lead them
 - That king pledged loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar, but soon he rebelled
 - So the Babylonians returned and defeated the city a second time in 597 BC

- After the second attack, a new wave of prisoners were taken including Ezekiel
- Finally in 586 BC, after a second revolt by another Jewish king, the Babylonians returned a third time to put an end to Israel's defiance
 - This time they utterly destroyed the city and the temple and removed the rest of the people
 - It's this third siege that Ezekiel is depicting in his charade before the exiles
 - That third siege is still about seven years away, so Ezekiel is predicting the complete destruction of the city
- Keep in mind that at this early point in the captivity, the people of Israel still assumed they would be returning to their city sooner than later
 - As long as the city walls remained intact and the temple continued to operate, there was reason for such hope
 - But Ezekiel is telling God's people there was no reason for such hope
- In fact, much worse is yet to come
 - Not only will the city be destroyed, but still more calamity is planned after that
 - We see these details in the second sign God gives Ezekiel to act out
- In v.4 the Lord commands Ezekiel to lie on his side on the ground near the display he created
 - For 390 days, Ezekiel would take up a position laying on his left side, presumably with his face looking north
 - And then for another 40 days he would lay on his right side looking south
 - The greater time for the north reflects their greater degree of sin
 - As he lay he would face the brick city while holding an iron plate up between himself and the model he built
 - He probably didn't lay on the ground 24/7 during those days

- We know this because later we'll read how Ezekiel is required to make food for himself
- So it's likely he lay in this position for a good part of each day
- And he did so for the number of consecutive days God ordered
- The Lord says Ezekiel will be "bearing" the iniquity of houses of Israel and Judah
 - To bear means to carry or be burdened with something
 - So Ezekiel represents the houses of Israel, each on the ground as if struck down, one facing north and one facing south
 - Each of them bearing the consequences of their sins under the Old Covenant
- Finally, that iron plate was held in such a way that it separated Ezekiel from the city
 - The plate was probably the type used to bake the meal offering for use in the temple
 - The symbol told the people they would be barred from the city of Jerusalem and from their temple
 - The iron plate emphasized the firmness of this judgment
 - Israel would not be able to penetrate the barrier God was erecting
 - Also notice that Ezekiel's arm was to be bare during this time
 - Traditionally, bearing a body part was a sign of hostility or anger
 - This further emphasized the Lord was acting in hostility against the people of Israel in these matters
 - Their fate wasn't accidental or a sign of God's inability to defend them
 - It was an outcome brought against them by a covenant-keeping God
 - So this second part of the charade explains the long-term consequences for Israel's sins under the Old Covenant
 - Not only would Jerusalem be sieged and the temple destroyed

- But Israel will be barred from free access to the city for many years
- This judgment will last for a total of 430 years
- To understand this judgment properly, we must understand that access to the city and the temple lies at the center of all God's prophecies to Israel
 - God has promised His people a glorious future living in their land, centered on their holy city, with a temple filled by the glory of God
 - God fulfills that promise to Israel in the future Millennial kingdom through the New Covenant
 - But in the meantime, the Lord granted Israel a foretaste of that blessing through the Old Covenant
 - So long as they keep the terms of the Old Covenant, the people could live in their land in peace with the Lord's glory dwelling among them in the temple
 - But when Israel rejected the Lord and His Law, they forfeited that earthly blessing
 - And now as a consequence, the Lord declares the people would lose access to their city and temple for 430 years
 - There were temporary periods during those 430 years when Israel re-entered the city and the temple operated (as in the times after Nehemiah)
 - But even then, the people were still restricted by the authority of Gentile rulers, whether Persian or Greek
 - Before long, they would find themselves pushed out of their land again, the temple defiled, and the sacrificial services halted
 - This situation would continue for 430 years, but at the end of that time, the judgment would come to an end
 - And as the Lord foretold, exactly 430 years after the fall of Jerusalem in 156 BC, the Maccabean kingdom re-established Jewish control of Jerusalem and the temple
 - In that year, a Jewish family called the Maccabees miraculously overthrew the remnants of the Greek

- The Maccabeans re-established free and independent Jewish control over the land and the city of Jerusalem and temple for about 100 years
- Jews still celebrate Hanukkah today in remembrance of that victory
- This outcome fits Ezekiel's charade perfectly
 - He depicted both Jewish kingdoms laying down, prevented from reconquering their city and temple, for 430 years
 - And at the end of that time, they would stand again, retaking the city for a time
- So parts 1 and 2 of Ezekiel's charade foretell of a city destroyed and a people scattered for 430 years
 - And there are still two more parts to this prophecy, also told in mime
 - The third part finishes this chapter

Ezek. 4:9 “But as for you, take wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet and spelt, put them in one vessel and make them into bread for yourself; you shall eat it according to the number of the days that you lie on your side, three hundred and ninety days.

Ezek. 4:10 “Your food which you eat shall be twenty shekels a day by weight; you shall eat it from time to time.

Ezek. 4:11 “The water you drink shall be the sixth part of a hin by measure; you shall drink it from time to time.

- Now the Lord gives Ezekiel instructions on how to eat and drink during the time he is performing his daily charade
 - First, he should take six grains together and mill them into a flour from which he will make his bread
 - This is an unusual mixture of grains
 - Today, there are companies selling bread in the supermarket based on this same mixture, calling it Ezekiel bread
 - They claim it's a supernatural combination of grains that God intended for the best nutrition
 - Ironically, the context of Ezekiel 4 makes clear God had a very different purpose, an opposite purpose in fact

- This strange mixture of grain doesn't represent health but rather it symbolizes Israel's poverty and desperation during the coming siege
 - Notice Ezekiel could only eat the equivalent of twenty shekels by weight per day
 - This is about 8-9 slices of bread each day...that's only about 720 calories per day
 - That's a starvation diet. Ezekiel would have lost a lot of weight during those 14 months
- Moreover, he could only drink a sixth of a hin of water, which was about a quart of water per day
 - In a hot, desert climate like Babylon, this was scarcely enough water to survive
 - Obviously, Ezekiel did survive, but it wasn't comfortable or easy
- And there's a second part to the third sign

Ezek. 4:12 “You shall eat it as a barley cake, having baked it in their sight over human dung.”

Ezek. 4:13 Then the Lord said, “Thus will the sons of Israel eat their bread unclean among the nations where I will banish them.”

Ezek. 4:14 But I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I have never been defiled; for from my youth until now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has any unclean meat ever entered my mouth.”

Ezek. 4:15 Then He said to me, “See, I will give you cow's dung in place of human dung over which you will prepare your bread.”

Ezek. 4:16 Moreover, He said to me, “Son of man, behold, I am going to break the staff of bread in Jerusalem, and they will eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and drink water by measure and in horror,

Ezek. 4:17 because bread and water will be scarce; and they will be appalled with one another and waste away in their iniquity.

- The bread Ezekiel makes must be baked a very specific way, an especially odd and offensive way
 - He must bake them like one bakes a barley cake, which means over an open fire
 - He must bake them publicly, where he will be seen by Israel

- And the most important part...he must cook the cakes using human excrement as fuel for the fire
- Here again, this reflects the conditions that would exist inside the city of Jerusalem during the coming siege
 - People will have burned everything they can find in the city
 - Leaving them with no choice but to burn poop
- But at this point, Ezekiel's had about all he can take
 - He responds in v.14, "Ah Lord God!"
 - Think about all Ezekiel has witnessed...the glory of God, the throne, cherubim
 - And think about he has patiently received all of God's demanding instructions without even a word so far
 - But now he's at a breaking point, and he tells the Lord he can't bear to do this
 - That tells us how desperate Ezekiel must feel at this point...he's reached such a breaking point that he's finally compelled to answer back to God
 - He says Lord I've done all that the Law required my whole life to avoid defiling myself with my food
 - What Ezekiel is saying is he feels will be defiled by this request
 - To be clear, there is no prohibition in the Law against using human feces as fuel for a fire
 - But that's not the point really
 - The point is Ezekiel's conscience is wounded by this request, so he asks the Lord for relief
 - The Lord could have overruled Ezekiel's objections, but He doesn't
 - He graciously substitutes cow dung instead, since it communicates the same message though perhaps a little less graphically
- The explains the point in these things in vs.16-17

- He wants Ezekiel to illustrate the poverty Israel would experience during the coming siege of 586 BC
 - The people will experience a famine created by the siege
 - They will eat bread by weight and water by measure, meaning it will be closely rationed
 - They will become anxious over where to find food and horrified at the prospect of running out of water
 - In general, they will be appalled at what people are reduced to doing to survive in the city as a result of the Babylonian siege
- And true to God's word, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were reduced to inhuman measures to survive the 18-month siege
 - The Babylonians starved out the people leading to virtual cannibalism
 - Here's what Jeremiah, a contemporary of Ezekiel, foretold would happen in the city during the siege

Jer. 19:4 “Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent **Jer. 19:5** and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind;

Jer. 19:6 therefore, behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when this place will no longer be called Topheth or the valley of Ben-hinnom, but rather the valley of Slaughter.

Jer. 19:7 “I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hand of those who seek their life; and I will give over their carcasses as food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.

Jer. 19:8 “I will also make this city a desolation and an object of hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its disasters.

Jer. 19:9 “I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they will eat one another's flesh in the siege and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life will distress them.”

- So the Ezekiel's strange diet and cooking practices were pictures of the desperation to come upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem

- There is still one more part to this charade, which we'll see next week in chapter 5
 - But already we're getting a much better appreciation for the cost of Ezekiel's service to the Lord
 - He will suffer physical discomfort, public humiliation, and deprivation in serving as a prophet
- More than that, Ezekiel has been asked to give up normal life
 - Not just a part of his life or some piece of his life
 - He will literally ceasing living normally for a time
 - He will spend most of everyday for the next 14 months just laying around, getting up only when he needs to eat or drink
 - Some of you may be wondering if your teenager has been called to be a prophet of the Lord...likely not
- Joking aside, Ezekiel's sacrifice was not easy and it likely included persecution and even self-doubt
 - Can you imagine waking up every day for 14 months with this assignment to complete?
 - Do you think you may have wavered in completing the task?
 - Ezekiel's faithfulness is reminiscent of Noah
 - Everything in his life stopped so that he could be 100% dedicated to serving God in a remarkable task
- Last week I told you that following the Lord as His disciple will bring a cost
 - We must be prepared to set aside things we prefer, should the Lord ask us to do so for His purposes and glory
 - If that challenge seem daunting, then let this chapter be a source of some encouragement to you to take up that challenge
 - Jesus said His yoke is light and the burden is easy
 - This is true, because the Lord does all the heavy lifting
 - For example, notice back in v.8 the Lord told Ezekiel He would help Ezekiel perform his tough assignment

- Try laying down on one side for an extended period of time and you'll find it difficult and painful after a short while
- Then try doing it for 430 days straight...it's torture
- But while Ezekiel is on the ground in that awkward position, the Lord says He will hold Ezekiel there as if tied by rope
- So Ezekiel won't even have to do the hardest part of the work in serving God, because the Lord will make that burden easy for him
 - But Ezekiel still had to show up for work each morning, and there were still going to be difficult moments along the way
 - That's why you've heard me say often that serving Christ is less about ability, it's more about availability
 - Show up for work and watch how the Lord makes you equal to the work He assigns
- But if you're worried that the Lord will ask too much of you, take note also that the Lord recognizes we have personal limitations
 - When Ezekiel couldn't stomach the Lord's command to cook with feces, the Lord graciously gave him something he could accept
 - The Lord granted Ezekiel's request because Ezekiel spoke out of conviction, not complaint
- The Lord will certainly challenge us at times, moving us out of our comfort zone when it stands in the way of our spiritual development
 - But he won't give us more than we can handle
 - He may even grant you a request for something easier if you ask
 - Just don't expect the Lord to honor your request for relief if it comes from a selfishness or lazy desire
 - Serving the living God still requires a sacrifice
- Finally, let's consider the most obvious and perhaps most critical question raised by this strange chapter...why did God employ charades?
 - Later in chapter 5 Ezekiel finally gets permission to speak to Israel

- And at that point he will explain these same things to them with words
- Which begs the question, why did God bother with the drama in the meantime?
- Moreover, we know the word of God is the most powerful force in the universe
 - Scripture says that the world is literally held together by the power of God's word
 - And that when everything created has passed away, the word of God will still remain
 - And that the word of prophecy is so sure, that if necessary, rocks would cry out to fulfill its demands
 - So we know that the word of God is entirely sufficient to reveal the glory of God and to bring about the will of God
- And for centuries the Lord did speak to Israel by His word
 - He explained patiently through the prophets that consequences would follow for Israel's failure to keep the Law of their covenant
 - For example, Isaiah told the people that Babylon would destroy them

Is. 13:3 I have commanded My consecrated ones,
I have even called My mighty warriors,
My proudly exulting ones,
To execute My anger.

Is. 13:4 A sound of tumult on the mountains,
Like that of many people!
A sound of the uproar of kingdoms,
Of nations gathered together!
The Lord of hosts is mustering the army for battle.

Is. 13:5 They are coming from a far country,
From the farthest horizons,
The Lord and His instruments of indignation,
To destroy the whole land.

Is. 13:6 Wail, for the day of the Lord is near!
It will come as destruction from the Almighty.

- But Israel ignored the warnings
- And they profaned the name of the Lord in front of the nations
- So the time has come for the Lord to make an example of Israel
 - If Israel would not fulfill their purpose to be an example to the world through their obedience
 - Then the Lord would make them an example through disobedience
 - And He orders Ezekiel to engage in a long, tortuous display to get the nation's attention
 - So that just as Ezekiel caught Israel's attention through his bizarre behavior
 - So would Israel would draw the world's attention by the terrible things they endured
 - As Jeremiah explains:

Jer. 19:7 "I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hand of those who seek their life; and I will give over their carcasses as food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.

Jer. 19:8 "I will also make this city a desolation and an object of hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its disasters.

- The Lord didn't intend to correct Israel's behavior through Ezekiel's drama
- It was too late for that
- He was preparing to show Himself mighty and faithful to His word, ironically because Israel had been neither
- Because God's word will be fulfilled even if it requires that rocks cry out
- As God's people we need to understand that we too have been given a mission by Christ to witness to the world
 - Our message is first and foremost one of words, the word of God and the Gospel of Christ, specifically

- But it's also a message formed in our actions because our actions often speak louder than our words
- So as followers of Christ, we have to concern ourselves with how we live

James 1:21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

James 1:22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

- If we live out faith in the right way, we gain opportunity for people to hear the receive the true power of God's word
 - We don't have to be perfect or even pretend to be perfect
 - We just have to be sincere and genuine
 - Most of all, we have to set our hearts on obedience and faithfulness, rather than lip service and token efforts
- Let's set our goal to be a witness for Christ
 - Rather than to give cause to make an example of us