

Ezekiel 1:1-3  
Psalm 137  
1 Peter 1

“What Does It Mean to Be Jerusalem in Babylon?”

### **Introduction: Why Ezekiel?**

Children,

I want you to think for a moment about what exile means.

Because 2,600 years ago,

the leading families of Jerusalem were taken into exile in Babylon.

If you had been a child in Jerusalem in 597 B.C.,

you would first have experienced the Babylonian siege.

Your parents would have been worried –

What is going to happen?

What will King Jehoiachin do?

We don't have enough food to survive a long siege!

And then came the day that King Jehoiachin called for the elders of Jerusalem.

Afterwards he came out to speak to the people:

he was only 18 years old – barely more than a child himself –

and he had only been king for three months.

He told you that Nebuchadnezzar,

the king of Babylon, had demanded that he surrender,

and that he would be deported to Babylon.

There was a lot of nodding of heads –

that was expected –

but then he added,

that Nebuchadnezzar was going to take all the elders

and all the leading families as well.

“Yahweh has abandoned us” – he said –

“so we might as well serve Nebuchadnezzar.”

King Jehoiachin had never been known for his faith in Yahweh.

His grandfather, Josiah, had been a good and faithful king –

but Jehoiachin was more like his father, Jehoiakim,

who trusted more in Egyptian military power, than in Yahweh.

But Jehoiachin's words would have burned into your mind

over the weeks and months that you walked

the thousand miles to Babylon.

(Yes, you would have walked a thousand miles!)

And every day, as you walked through the increasing heat of early summer,

you would have wondered:

Yahweh promised the land to Abraham our father!

Has Yahweh now abandoned us?

And when you reached Babylon, everything would be strange:

no mountains – no hills – just the desert,  
with the rivers and canals of Babylon.  
In Jerusalem you saw the holy temple every day.  
In Jerusalem you were reminded of the presence of Yahweh.  
But here in Babylon, all you see are pagan temples.

In Jerusalem your father was a palace official,  
and you would have grown up to be someone important.  
Here in Babylon, your father goes out to the fields every day as a laborer.  
Your future doesn't look so bright.

Unless, of course, you conform to Babylonian culture.  
They are always looking for bright young lads to train in the service of Babylon.  
If you will abandon Yahweh to serve the Babylonian gods,  
you could make something of yourself.

But then you remember Jerusalem –  
and you remember the temple –  
and you remember the strange sayings of that fanatic, Jeremiah,  
who had spoken openly to all the city that Jerusalem would go into exile,  
and that Yahweh would one day restore his people.

But Jeremiah is still in Jerusalem.  
The temple is still in Jerusalem.

I'm here in Babylon.  
I'm here in exile.

[Sing Psalm 137; Read 1 Peter 1:1-21]

Since we're starting a series on the book of Ezekiel,  
let me give you an overview:

Ezekiel starts with a remarkable vision of the glory of God.  
1:28 – “such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD”

The glory of the LORD will play an important role in the book.  
The first section (chapters 1-7) lays out the reason for God's coming judgment  
against Jerusalem.  
The idolatry of Israel has reached the point where it is simply too late.  
Judgment is coming – disaster will come – and when it comes,  
“they shall know that I am the LORD.”

The second section (chapters 8-11) is all one vision –  
the vision of the glory of the LORD departing from the temple.

I don't think we grasp how devastating that would be.

If the United States were invaded and someone destroyed our church buildings,  
we would be disappointed – and it would be a great loss –  
but we wouldn't think that our relationship with God had been altered!

The temple in Jerusalem was not just a building.

It was the place where God dwelt with his people.  
Solomon had said at the dedication of the temple,  
“the highest heaven cannot contain you,  
how much less this house that I have built,” (2 Chron 6:18)  
but still it was “the place where you have promised to set your name.” (20)  
God's dwelling is in the heavens,  
but Jerusalem – and the temple in Jerusalem –  
was the place where God's *name* dwelt with them.  
And God had promised to hear their prayers,  
when they prayed “toward” the temple.

If there is no temple,  
then will God hear our prayers?  
If there are no sacrifices,  
then will God forgive our sins?

So the temple takes center stage in Ezekiel.  
And the central problem of Ezekiel  
is how idolatry has corrupted the worship of Israel  
resulting in the destruction of the temple –  
resulting in the glory of the LORD departing from the temple –  
the presence of the LORD *leaving* Jerusalem.

Part of Ezekiel's point is that Yahweh had left the temple  
*before* Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it.  
It was not the pagan king who drove God out of the temple –  
it was Israel's idolatry!

God will not dwell with a rebellious people.

Your idolatry is what has got you into this mess.

You might think that Ezekiel's message would then be:  
therefore your repentance – and your faithful worship –  
will bring you back!

But that is *not* what Ezekiel says!  
Yes, Ezekiel calls us to repentance –  
but Ezekiel *never* says that repentance will get you back to the land.

Ezekiel 36:22-32 says this most clearly:

22 *“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God:  
It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act,  
but for the sake of my holy name,  
which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.  
23 And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name,  
which has been profaned among the nations,  
and which you have profaned among them.  
And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God,  
when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.”*

Notice how God says that it is *not* what you do – but what *he* does!

*24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries  
and bring you into your own land.  
25 I will sprinkle clean water on you,  
and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses,  
and from all your idols I will cleanse you.  
26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.  
And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.  
27 And I will put my Spirit within you,  
and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

Yes, it is important that you walk in God’s ways –  
but walking in God’s ways is something that only happens when *God himself*  
acts to save you and give you a new heart.

Ginger has this written on our refrigerator:

I cannot change Lena’s heart  
I cannot change Robert’s heart  
I cannot change William’s heart  
I cannot change Fiona’s heart  
I cannot change Lorna’s heart  
I cannot change Peter’s heart  
I cannot change Peter’s heart  
I cannot change *my own* heart

Who can?

Our hope is not that we will somehow reform ourselves and make ourselves better.  
Our hope is that God will give us a new heart and “cause us” to walk in his ways.

And therefore, when God does this:

*28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers,*

*and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*  
29 *And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses.*  
*And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you.*  
30 *I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant,*  
*that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.*  
31 *Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good,*  
*and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.*  
32 *It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord God;*  
*let that be known to you.*  
*Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.*

Israel's hope was not that they could escape death!  
Israel's hope was not that if only they worked harder and were more faithful,  
somehow they could avoid the exile.  
Israel's hope was that there was life beyond death –  
that *God* would raise them up and restore them.

And *that* is what God has done in Jesus.  
This is what Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 was all about.  
"You shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves,  
and raise you from your graves, O my people.  
And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live,  
and I will place you in your own land.  
Then you shall know that I am the LORD." (37:13-14)

Then at the end of Ezekiel,  
Ezekiel sees a vision of a new temple –  
a temple where the glory of the LORD would dwell once more.

In the first part the glory of the LORD departs from the temple.  
At the end the glory of the LORD fills the new temple.

Why is this important for us?  
Because Ezekiel sees this vision, not from Jerusalem, but from Babylon.  
Ezekiel is speaking to those who are in exile –  
to those who must sing the LORD's song in a foreign land.

And we, who live in Babylon, need to hear this message.  
We, who live as exiles and sojourners,  
need to remember that we are citizens of a heavenly Jerusalem.

In Isaiah, the prophet beheld the glory of the LORD in the temple.  
In Ezekiel, the prophet beholds the glory of the LORD in exile.

Next time we'll look at the content of his vision.  
Today, though, I want to show you the context of the vision.

So our four points today are, When? Where? Who? and What?

### **1. WHEN? It Was the Fifth Year of the Exile of King Jehoiachin**

When is Ezekiel writing?

“In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month,  
as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal,  
the heavens were opened,  
and I saw visions of God.”

The 30<sup>th</sup> year refers to Ezekiel’s age  
(we’ll come back to this when we talk about “who?”).  
But Ezekiel identifies the precise day when the word of the LORD came to him.  
It was the fourth month – and the fifth day.

Verse 2 identifies this as

*the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin).*

We have enough information from biblical texts, Babylonian chronicles,  
and other ancient sources,  
to calculate this date as July 31, 593 B.C.

Ezekiel will give precise dates for many of his prophecies.  
And I want you to think about this.  
We often think about history in rather vague terms,  
as things that happened “back then” some time.  
But on July 31, 593 B.C.,  
the heavens were opened, and Ezekiel saw visions of God.

But why is this date so important?

It was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin.

For most of you, that may not mean very much.

The story of King Jehoiachin is found in the books of Kings and Chronicles,  
but he’s not a very interesting king, so there are only 14 verses in Kings  
that describe his reign.

### **So why should you care about the exile of King Jehoiachin?**

Jehoiachin reigned for three months.

Let me put this provocatively:

if you do not understand the events surrounding the three month reign  
of King Jehoiachin  
you cannot understand one-third of the Bible.

We tend to focus on the New Testament –

and understandably so, since the NT interprets and explains the OT.

But the New Testament takes up less than ¼ of the pages of the Bible.

You could think of it this way:

less than a quarter of the Bible takes you from the Creation to David  
less than a quarter of the Bible is about David and Solomon  
more than a quarter of the Bible focuses on the Exile (more like a third)  
and less than a quarter of the Bible is found in the New Testament

And yet, this largest chunk of the Bible  
is the part that we understand the least.

But as we'll see as we go through Ezekiel –  
if you don't understand the Exile,  
you won't *really* understand the New Testament.

We often think about Christ as the new Adam.  
We often think about how Christ fulfills the promises to Abraham,  
or the relationship between Christ and the Law,  
or Christ as the Son of David.

But how often do we think of Christ as the one who brings us out of exile?

Ezekiel will take *all* of these themes and show us how they connect with the exile.

It is no stretch to say that every theme in the Old Testament  
passes through the exile in order to get to Christ.

Think back to our Genesis series.

We saw there that every main character passed through exile.

Abraham went down to Egypt.

Isaac was nearly sacrificed.

Jacob was exiled to Babylon.

And Joseph was a slave in Egypt.

God had been teaching his people ever since the beginning  
that the only way to glory is the way of the cross – the way of exile and death.

So let me give you a little background to July 31, 593 B.C.  
and say something about this “King Jehoiachin.”

#### Timeline:

Year	King	Event	Prophet
1000	David	Jerusalem founded	Nathan
960s	Solomon	temple built	
930s	Rehoboam	kingdom divided (Israel/Judah)	Ahijah
800s	(Omride Dynasty in Israel – e.g., King Ahab)		Elijah/Elisha
722	Hezekiah	Israel destroyed by Assyrians	Isaiah
620s	Josiah	Babylonians overthrow Assyria	Jeremiah
598	Jehoiachin	Nebuchadnezzar takes captives	Jeremiah
587	Zedekiah	Neb. destroys Jerusalem, incl. temple	Jeremiah/Ezekiel

For 150 years (740s to 590s) Jerusalem and her neighbors  
were caught between the international politics of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt.  
Assyria was the dominant power  
until the rise of the neo-Babylonian empire in the 620s.  
Egypt was weaker than Assyria or Babylon,  
but was generally able to fight off the Assyrians or Babylonians –  
and occasionally attempted to regain its old power over Palestine.

If you are king in Jerusalem –  
or for that matter, if you are part of the ruling families in Jerusalem –  
this means that the period from 625 BC to 586 BC  
is a very dangerous political swamp.

The Assyrians are on their way out –  
Ninevah had been destroyed, and it doesn't look like they'll be back.

But who will take over?  
Judah isn't strong enough to stand alone.  
But will it be Egypt or Babylon?  
If the king picks the wrong ally –  
the results could be devastating!  
And then there are those pesky prophets who keep insisting that foreign alliances  
are displeasing to God.

Jehoiachin's grandfather, Josiah, had listened to those prophets.  
He asserted Jerusalem's independence,  
and 2 Kings 23 tells us how he destroyed all the idols of the nations  
that had infested the land.

But after the death of Josiah in 609,  
Judah was overrun.  
First it was the Egyptians:  
Only three months after he had killed Josiah,  
Pharaoh Neco captured Josiah's son, Jehoahaz,  
and installed Jehoahaz's brother, Jehoiakim, as king.  
But then Nebuchadnezzar attacked –  
and Jehoiakim served him briefly for three years,  
but then turned back to a pro-Egyptian stance.  
2 Kings 24:7 explains the political problem with this:  
“the king of Egypt did not come again out of his land,  
for the king of Babylon had taken all that belonged to the king of Egypt  
from the Brook of Egypt to the river Euphrates.”

This happened in the year 605 at the Battle of Carchemish –  
where the Babylonian crown prince, Nebuchadnezzar,

routed the Egyptians and claimed all of Syria-Palestine.

And so for the next few years  
there were those who urged King Jehoiakim to side with Egypt –  
and others urged Babylon –  
and some, apparently, urged him to trust in Yahweh alone.

And so after the untimely death of his father, in 598 BC,  
the eighteen year old king, Jehoiachin, took the throne.

“and he reigned three months in Jerusalem....  
And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 24:8-9).

Three months.  
He didn't have much time to do anything.  
But the point is that he didn't try to change anything.  
He allowed his father's policies to continue.

*At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up to Jerusalem,  
and the city was besieged.  
And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to the city  
while his servants were besieging it,  
and Jehoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon...  
The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign [Nebuchadnezzar]  
and carried off all the treasurers of the house of the LORD  
and the treasures of the king's house...  
He carried away all Jerusalem....10,000 captives....  
None remained except the poorest people of the land.  
(2 Kings 24:10-14, 17)*

This happened on March 16, 597

But why does Ezekiel date this vision (and indeed all of his dates)  
around the captivity of Jehoiachin?

After all, Jehoiachin only reigned for three months!

But Jehoiachin *lived* for at least another 40 years!  
There are a series of Babylonian texts that refer to Jehoiachin as the captive  
“King of Judah” from 595-570.  
And in 561 BC – 36 years after his capture –  
he was given special rank among other exiled kings (2 Kings 25:27-30).

Yes, there are other men (his uncles) who sit on the throne in Jerusalem for a few years,  
but the true king is in captivity in exile.

But July 31, 593 was a very important date for another reason.

It was at this time (according to Jeremiah 51:59)  
that Zedekiah, the current king of Judah (or the “regent”) visited Babylon.  
Zedekiah was Jehoiachin’s uncle.

It may be that the exiles had heard of Zedekiah’s presence in the capital.  
Perhaps there was hope that the exiles would be returned to Jerusalem.  
Perhaps the exile is over and we can go home!

Perhaps God will be merciful and allow us to go back to the temple

The fifth year of Jehoiachin’s exile –  
July 31, 593 –  
was the time when God chose to speak and explain what he was doing.

And as we will see throughout Ezekiel,  
the message is that God is not yet finished with judgment.  
The temple will be destroyed (which happens six years later in 587 BC).  
God’s presence will depart from Jerusalem.

You don’t get to go home.

You must stay here – in exile.

And that brings us to our second question:

## **2. WHERE? Among the Exiles by the Chebar Canal**

*Where* is Ezekiel?  
“among the exiles by the Chebar canal.”

The Chebar canal is well-known to ancient historians.  
There are many references in ancient literature to Jewish people in this period.  
Many lived by the Kabar canal – near Nippur.

This was part of an elaborate system of canals  
that brought water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers  
to the cities and fields of the Babylonian empire.

Many of Ezekiel’s prophecies will speak to the leaders of Jerusalem –  
the prince, the elders, the priests, the prophets.

Some have wondered why Ezekiel talks so much about the leaders of Jerusalem.  
After all, Ezekiel is in Babylon!  
Is he just talking to the exiles about what is happening “back home”?

Not really.  
After all, who are these exiles?  
The exiles *are* the leaders of Jerusalem!

On July 31, 593, there are more of Jerusalem's elders, princes, prophets, and priests  
by the Chebar canal, than in Jerusalem!

Jerusalem is in Exile!

And as we go throughout the book of Ezekiel  
we will continually come back to this.

### **What does it mean to be Jerusalem in exile?**

What does it mean to live as the people of God in Babylon?

But too often when we think about biblical ethics – when we think about how to live –  
we start with Moses and the law,  
and then we jump straight to the New Testament.

But as we will see, the New Testament regularly thinks about Moses and the Law  
in the light of the prophets!

The Law was given to Israel as the way in which Israel was supposed to live in the Land.  
The Law does not bring you into the Land –  
rather, the Law shows you how God's people live in the Promised Land.

But we don't live in the Promised Land!  
We live in exile –  
we live in Babylon.

We are strangers and aliens on the earth,  
looking for a heavenly city – as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Ezekiel will tell us what it means to live as Jerusalem in Babylon.

But this brings us to our third question:

### **3. WHO? Ezekiel the Priest**

Let's think for a moment about this man.

“May God strengthen him”  
was the prayer of Ezekiel's parents when they named him.

It is the thirtieth year.

Since there is no other referent, this probably refers to Ezekiel's age.  
This means he was born in 623/622 BC –  
the year in which Josiah discovered the scroll of Deuteronomy.

He would have been about 18 years old in the year 605  
(the year Jeremiah's scroll was burned by the king)  
Was Ezekiel there that day?

As the son of a priest, he would have been part of the Jerusalem elite,  
and the Jerusalem elite was a small group!  
Ezekiel plainly knew *of* Jeremiah (and most likely knew him personally),  
and he interacts with Jeremiah's prophecies.

Jeremiah was probably 25-30 years older,  
and he remained in Jerusalem after Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon.

But there is something else that is important about Ezekiel's age.

In Numbers 4 we are told that the priests began their service at age 30.

Jesus was "about 30 years old" (Luke 3:23) when he began his ministry.

Ezekiel will never serve in the temple in Jerusalem –  
but here by the Chebar Canal, he will see the glory of the LORD  
in a way that those who serve the temple in Jerusalem never will.

So Ezekiel is 30 years old when he enters his ministry.

Ezekiel will never offer sacrifices in an earthly temple –

but he undergoes a priestly consecration of seven days (3:16),  
and of all the prophets, he is the one whose ministry is oriented most  
toward the temple.

#### **4. WHAT? The Heavens Were Opened, and I Saw Visions of God...the Word of the LORD came to Ezekiel...and the Hand of the LORD Was upon Him There**

And we see this in our fourth and final question:

What?

What is God doing here?

At precisely the time when the exiles are wondering about their future,  
Yahweh shows Ezekiel a vision of himself.

The vision of Yahweh here in Ezekiel 1

is designed to get you to take your eyes off of the situation  
and look to him.

I know that you are in exile!

I know that living as a Christian in Babylon is *hard*.

But that is why the *first* thing God does is reveal *himself* to Ezekiel.

We'll look at the content of the vision next week,

but today I want you to see how Ezekiel describes this in verses 1-3.

"The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God."

As we go through Ezekiel, we will continually ask the question,  
what does it mean to live as the people of God in exile?

And at the heart of the answer to that question  
is the vision of God.

Think of how the NT speaks of this:

Paul says:

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.  
4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.  
5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:3-6)

Hebrews 2 makes the same point:

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. 9 But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:8-9)

And of course, how do we see Jesus? Hebrews 11 says

13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

So why study Ezekiel?

Because we need to see Jesus!

If we are going to prevail against Babylon, we need to see him!