

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

“Thirty Something”

1:1-3

Each of us has looked forward to a milestone birthday that would bring us to the age at which we could pursue a desire or a career.

- Driving age is always a big one. You can't wait to get your permit and start motoring around.
- A lot of young people in our area look forward to turning age 17 so that, with parental consent, they can enlist in the military. Or 18 if they can't get their parents to cooperate.

Look at verse one of Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 1:1 Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year...

It's probably a reference to his turning 30. All his life Ezekiel was looking forward to turning 30. He was born into the tribe in Israel that served as its priests. You served as a priest between the ages of 30 and 50 (see Numbers four). His entire life up until age 30 would be dominated by preparation for the priesthood.

Ezekiel, however, never would serve as a priest.

Ezekiel 1:1 Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar...

On his thirtieth birthday he found himself dwelling in a settlement called Tel-Abib on the banks of the Chebar in Babylon. The Israelites had been conquered by the Babylonian Empire.

His dreams of being a priest and serving in his course in the Temple at Jerusalem were pretty well dashed. If he understood the words of Jeremiah the way Daniel did then he knew that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years. Even if he saw the Temple again he would be past the maximum age and would not be able to serve. He'd never serve as a priest. God called him instead to be a prophet. There in Babylon, in captivity, Ezekiel would serve God as His prophet for some twenty-plus years.

Welcome to servanthood! Say "Hello!" to God's will for your life.

Seriously, while it's great to dream and to plan everything must be subordinated to the understanding, "nevertheless not my will but God's will be done."

Had Ezekiel been born a few years earlier he would have enjoyed life serving as a priest during a time of great revival. King Josiah was Judah's godly king from about 641BC until 610BC. In the eighteenth year of his rule Josiah began to encourage the exclusive worship of Yahweh and outlawed all other forms of worship. Josiah destroyed the living quarters for male prostitutes, which were in the Temple and also destroyed foreign pagan objects related to the worship of Baal, Ashterah, "and all the hosts of the heavens." Josiah had the living pagan priests executed and had the bones of dead pagan priests exhumed from their graves and burned on their altars. He destroyed altars and images of pagan deities.

Josiah ordered the High Priest Hilkiah to use the tax monies which had been collected over the years to repair the neglect and damage suffered by the Temple during the reigns of Amon and Manasseh.

Hilkiah discovered the Book of the Law. Some speculate it may have been the original Pentateuch penned by Moses. Hilkiah brought this scroll to Josiah's attention, and the king had it read to a crowd in Jerusalem. He

was praised for this piety by the prophetess Huldah, who made the prophecy that all involved would die without having to see God's judgment on Judah for the sins they had committed in prior generations.

Josiah also reinstated the Passover celebrations and returned the Ark of the Covenant to the Temple (Second Chronicles 35). (This was the last recorded mention of the Ark).

What a glorious time to be getting ready to enter your service as a priest! But before his thirtieth birthday things would change rather dramatically.

Josiah was killed in 610BC in a battle at Megiddo by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt. Josiah's middle son, Jehoahaz, reigned over Judah for the next three months. He was taken captive by Necho who then installed Josiah's eldest son, Jehoiakim, as ruler of Judah.

Enter Babylon as a world power. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated Pharaoh Necho. He came to Jerusalem around 605BC. He left Jehoiakim in charge but took away many of the ruling class in Judah - including Daniel and his three friends. Eleven years later Jehoiakim foolishly rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Jehoiakim died before the siege and his son, Jehoiachin, ruled in his place. In this second siege Nebuchadnezzar took away 10,000, including Ezekiel.

Zedekiah was next set up to rule Judah as a tributary to Babylon. Against good and godly advice from Jeremiah, Zedekiah allied himself with Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar came a third and final time. He laid siege and ruined Jerusalem and its Temple. It was 586BC - just twenty-three years after Josiah's death.

Ezekiel missed the opportunity to be a priest under Josiah by just a few years. Instead of riding the wave of revival in Jerusalem he was exiled by the shores of a Babylonian canal.

God had a calling for His priest:

Ezekiel 1:1 Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

We read of “the heavens” being “opened” four times in the New Testament:

- In Matthew 3:16 the heavens open at the baptism of Jesus and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove.
- In John 1:51 Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see the heavens open as angels ascend and descend to minister to the Lord.
- In The Revelation 4:1 the heavens open to receive John to see the visions of the future.
- In The Revelation 19:11 the heavens open as Jesus returns to earth in His Second Coming at the end of the age.

Here the “heavens were opened” so that Ezekiel could see “visions of God.” The revelations Ezekiel received were in many forms and are some of the most unique in all the Word of God. For example, Ezekiel is called upon to perform about ten symbolic skits to communicate God’s prophecies to His people. Three of them are in chapter four:

- He builds a model of a city under siege.
- He lies on his left side for 390 days, then his right side for an additional 40 days.
- He cooks rations using human excrement.

It is a prophecy to symbolize God’s judgment on the nation of Judah.

By far the most dramatic symbol is the one we’ll encounter in chapter twenty-four.

Ezekiel 24:15 Also the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

Ezekiel 24:16 "Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with one stroke; yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, nor shall your tears run down.

Ezekiel 24:17 Sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead; bind your turban on your head, and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover your lips, and do not eat man's bread of sorrow."

Ezekiel 24:18 So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died; and the next morning I did as I was commanded.

Ezekiel 24:19 And the people said to me, "Will you not tell us what these things signify to us, that you behave so?"

Ezekiel 24:20 Then I answered them, "The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

Ezekiel 24:21 'Speak to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God: 'Behold, I will profane My sanctuary, your arrogant boast, the desire of your eyes, the delight of your soul; and your sons and daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword.

Ezekiel 24:22 And you shall do as I have done; you shall not cover your lips nor eat man's bread of sorrow.

Ezekiel 24:23 Your turbans shall be on your heads and your sandals on your feet; you shall neither mourn nor weep, but you shall pine away in your iniquities and mourn with one another.

Ezekiel 24:24 Thus Ezekiel is a sign to you; according to all that he has done you shall do; and when this comes, you shall know that I am the Lord God.' "

Biblical historians show it was on the day Nebuchadnezzar began his final destructive siege on Jerusalem that Ezekiel's wife died.

There is no greatness for God, in God's service, without suffering, without sacrifice. Suffering is in the hands of God. It will find you.

Sacrifice, however, is in your hands. You are called upon to offer yourself a living sacrifice. Depth and power in your service come from a life of real sacrifice as God takes you through suffering.

Ezekiel 1:2 On the fifth day of the month, which was in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity,

I'll be first to admit I get lost in the dates. Ezekiel had been taken into captivity with King Jehoiachin in March of 597BC. As the book opens Ezekiel was already in captivity having been carried off in the second siege. He prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem six or seven years before it happened.

In fact, the book can be outlined in this simple format:

- Chapters 1-24 contain prophecies after the first and second sieges but before the third siege and the final destruction of Jerusalem.
- Chapters 25-32 contain prophecies relating to the fall of Jerusalem.
- Chapters 33-48 contain prophecies after the fall of Jerusalem - including its future restoration in the end times.

(You can divide the book into a fourth part if you take chapters 25-32 in two parts since in them Ezekiel addresses seven Gentile nations as well as Israel).

In the early part of the book Ezekiel wrote to show the exiles they needed to prepare for a lengthy stay in Babylon. In the latter part of the book, after the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC, he comforted them with the hope that they would be regathered to Jerusalem.

Here are a few other 'fascinating facts' about Ezekiel:

- Ezekiel is one of only two people in the Bible who were commanded by God to eat a scroll. (The other was John).
- The Book of Ezekiel contains more specific dates than any other Old Testament prophetic book.
- Nothing else is recorded about Ezekiel in the Word of God except what we read in his book.
- Ezekiel is one of two Old Testament books that describe the fall of Satan. (The other is Isaiah).
- In the book there are at least twenty-five references to the Holy Spirit.
- At least nine chapters describe the future glory of Israel during the Millennial Kingdom.

Ezekiel 1:3 the word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the River Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was upon him there.

Jeremiah had been prophesying for about 35 years to this point. Daniel was just beginning his amazing ministry but was at the heart of the action in the very courts of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon.

Ezekiel was stuck out along the River Chebar, a sort of canal that was connected to the River Euphrates, in a Jewish settlement. He was comfortable but obscure.

He was out in the sticks, a nobody, a wanna-be priest who would never serve in the Temple.

He was you and I stuck in Central California, out in the sticks. But from him we can learn to forget our wanna-be's, or our coulda-been's, and simply receive God's Word.

The Word still comes to us as we read it, as we're taught it. It may not seem as dramatic but it is far more complete. The apostle Peter reminds us in his letters that these Old Testament guys didn't have as complete an understanding as we do of their own prophecies.

Is "the hand of the Lord upon [us] here" by the Kings River? Well, He certainly indwells us. Jesus further promised to send His Holy Spirit upon us. So I'd say, "Yes, the hand of the Lord is upon us."

Let's hasten the Lord's coming. Let's serve Him according to His calling and not our own criteria. Let's sacrifice - really sacrifice. Let's trust Him to give us grace through our suffering.