



God chose to spark revival through people who seemed counted out, cast aside, and disregarded. In this 8-week Bible study, readers encounter a unique picture of revival through Ezekiel's prophecies. Participants are awakened to a need for revival in their own hearts, resulting in greater obedience and a bolstered faith.

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CONTENTS

Inviting Revival	8
A Brief Historical Synopsis	
Week One: A Startling Revival	17
When Circumstances Don't Match Our Expectations	
<i>Ezekiel 1–4</i>	
Week Two: Awakened to Revival	47
Knowing Our God & Awakening Our Purpose	
<i>Ezekiel 5–11</i>	
Week Three: The Truth Regarding Revival	75
Let the Truth Be Told	
<i>Ezekiel 12–14</i>	
Week Four: The Purpose of Revival	107
Our Beautiful Purpose	
<i>Ezekiel 15–18</i>	
Week Five: The Pathway to Revival	141
Looking In, Bending Down, and Reaching Out	
<i>Ezekiel 19–24</i>	
Week Six: Reaching the World through Revival	175
God's Heart for the Nations	
<i>Ezekiel 25–32</i>	
Week Seven: Scenes of Revival!	207
God's Heart for His People	
<i>Ezekiel 33–39</i>	
Week Eight: Revival TODAY!	245
Our Future Hope	
<i>Various New Testament Passages</i>	
Acknowledgments	280
Notes	282



WEEK ONE



A STARTLING REVIVAL

*When Circumstances Don't
Match Our Expectations*

WEEK 1 | DAY 1

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

EZEKIEL 1

Have you ever had a morning when you glanced at the clock, saw it was well before noon, and you felt like you had already run a marathon? I personally have never run a marathon, but if the exhaustion I felt after hobbling my way through a 5K is any indication of what it might feel like, well then, no thank you! I'll leave the marathon running to those more disciplined and courageous than I am!

But we've all had those mornings, haven't we? The trip to work was exceedingly hectic and you felt behind before you even arrived. The morning routine to get the kids to or through the school day felt like two steps forward and ten steps back. You were up all night with crying little ones you could not console. You wrestled in prayer for your spouse or loved one who was weathering a difficult season. You needed to reprimand your difficult coworker—again. You wondered how you might rekindle life in an empty nest or home upon the departure of those you love most dearly.

Life. Sometimes it's a hard journey. Some of us may feel like we're running in a marathon right now. On those days, when I feel like I'm chugging and puffing and barely making headway, I get discouraged. I begin to ask myself questions: "What am I here for?" and "Is this really the way life is supposed to be?" Sometimes I ask the more poignant question: "What is my purpose, anyway?" I grasp this idea in my head that if I am truly walking with the Lord, then life shouldn't feel like such a marathon. It should feel more like a walk in the park—peaceful and enjoyable.

God led Ezekiel on a long and arduous journey, over seven hundred miles from the city of Jerusalem where he had lived all of his life, to a settlement for exiled prisoners in the nation of Babylon. Now, before you take off your running shoes and claim that you are not in the mood to read about somebody else's bad news, take another swig of cold water and keep reading. What Ezekiel reckoned to be the ruin of his life actually placed him on a path of revival. God restored His relationship with His people, recaptured their hearts in revival, and awakened them to great purpose through Ezekiel's faithful obedience.

The living, active, Word of God spells out for us in Ezekiel's vivid and powerful messages *who we are and what we are to be doing*. It places our ultimate purpose before us in flashing neon lights. Ezekiel's name means "God strengthens," which aptly reminds us that most stages of life require God's endurance to pursue the path of purpose He has for us. Can I get an amen? So, friend, I hope you'll lace up those running shoes, hiking boots, or slide securely into those flip flops—God longs to bring revival to us today as well and rebuild those places ravaged by loss, awakening us to the greatest purpose in history!

READ EZEKIEL 1:1–9.

What is the date that Ezekiel records?

Where is Ezekiel living and with whom?

What did Ezekiel see and from which direction did it arrive?

Ezekiel's father was a priest. At Ezekiel's current age of thirty, he would have begun serving in the temple in Jerusalem as a priest as well. Instead he sits exiled in Babylon. Ezekiel is in a place of despondency. He is a prisoner taken far away from home with his purpose in life stripped from him. He would have spent nearly all of his life preparing for the priesthood and now such service was impossible, as he and his fellow exiles were far away from the temple in Jerusalem with little to no hope of immediate return. He informs us that he has already been in Babylon for five years and with each passing day, hope waned.

Have you ever had a dream or a goal for your life for which you spent years of your time and energy preparing? If so, what was it?

Did the Lord have you persist on that path for your life, or did He point you in another direction? How did the change or the fulfillment of your dream or goal make you feel?

Ezekiel's call comes at a very difficult time in his life. He records the exact dates of the call, possibly to authenticate for his audience, the other exiles, that the vision received is truly from the Lord. He begins his vision with a "stormy wind came out of the north." Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had invaded Israel from the north, but Ezekiel is not describing the arrival of an earthly king here; he's describing the arrival of one much greater.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, was rising as the next world power. The northern portion of Israel had already been defeated by the Assyrians over one hundred years prior. The southern portion of Israel, referred to historically as Judah, continued to have a king on the throne. Nebuchadnezzar had previously invaded Judah, but simultaneously fought the Egyptians, Assyrians, Tyrians, and many other Canaanite tribes. The exiles hoped they could soon return home and that the king of Babylon would focus further military exploits away from Judah, leaving their beloved temple in Jerusalem intact, securing God's promise to eternally keep a king on the throne in Jerusalem.

The Jews of Ezekiel's day believed that God dwelt in the temple of Jerusalem. Being exiled in Babylon meant that they were far removed from the presence of the Lord and had presumably lost His favor. (See Moses' warnings to Israel in Deuteronomy 29:24–28.) Yet, Ezekiel speaking about a thick cloud coming was to remind them that the Lord was with them even in the land of the Babylonians (Nah. 1:3). He had not forgotten them.

Have you ever had a time or a circumstance in your life when you felt like the Lord had forgotten you?

The Lord has opened up the throne room of heaven and allowed Ezekiel to peer into His holy dwelling. Ezekiel is trying to describe for us what he sees there. As I am writing this, I am sitting in my friend's home peering out onto a beautiful lake in mid-August in Michigan. The scene is so lushly green and tranquil that I can't help but wish that my husband could see it. Unfortunately, he is back in Arizona where it is brown, dry, and scorching hot. I will go home and try to describe for him every detail of my friend's stunning panoramic lake view outside

her window. However, no matter how many details I insert, it will prove difficult to know if he will really be able to fully appreciate what I am describing and if the mental pictures he will form in his mind will be completely accurate. Even several snapshots on my phone cannot do the entirety of the scene justice.

Ezekiel is describing a scene so breathtakingly awesome and of such beauty and perfection, we can only hope that the pictures we are forming in our mind bring God the glory due His Name. Even more importantly, we want to understand what God is trying to tell Ezekiel, and subsequently us, by allowing us the marvelous opportunity to get a sneak peek into heaven!

READ EZEKIEL 1:10–28.

These four living creatures are seraphs or the seraphim. Listen to this description by Matthew Henry:

The scattered perfections of the living creatures on earth meet in the angels of heaven. They have the understanding of a man, and such as far exceeds it; they also resemble man in tenderness and humanity. But a lion excels man in strength, and boldness, therefore the angels, who in this resemble them, put on the face of a lion. An ox excels man in diligence, and patience, in the work he has to do; therefore, the angels, employed in the service of God, and the church, put on the face of an ox. An eagle excels man in quickness and piercing sight, and in soaring high; and therefore, the angels, who seek things above, and see far into divine mysteries, put on the face of a flying eagle.¹

The wheels could go anywhere the Spirit of God led them. They had eyes all around. There is nothing beyond the sight or scope of God. He could see and reach His people in exile. Their placement served as part of His divine plan. The rainbow recalled God's promise to remember His promises (Gen. 9:16). Just like God was reminding Ezekiel and the exiles with him that God remembered them, so also, be reminded that God has not forgotten you. Wherever you are today, whether with dashed or fulfilled dreams, in a place of freedom or imprisonment,

experiencing despondency or hope, God sees you. And just like Ezekiel and his fellow exiles, He has positioned you with purpose. Your circumstance may seem hopeless or the opposite of how you imagined your life to be at this point, but will you, like Ezekiel, fall facedown and listen to the voice of your God speak to you? The Lord has something to tell us in these next few weeks; will you posture your heart to receive it?

Spend a few moments in stillness committing to listen to what the Lord desires to say to you. Ask Him to ready you to receive the message that He has prepared for you and for grace to follow Him in obedience. Ask Him for eyes to see and a heart to believe that it is often in our most difficult or disappointing circumstances that we are ready to behold His goodness and glory! We become ready for revival.

WEEK 1 | DAY 2

RECEIVING THE CALL

EZEKIEL 2

I don't like cliff-hangers! “Happily ever afters” are my preferred conclusions. Yesterday ended abruptly in the middle of Ezekiel's vision. God ushering a man into His throne room hardly constitutes a typical storyline in Scripture, so what is God's purpose in bringing Ezekiel there?

Ezekiel witnessed the full glory of Yahweh—can you even imagine it?

Before we dive back into this wild scene today (yes, we're still cliff-hanging!), let's do a little recap. Ezekiel's audience are his fellow exiles. While God will tell him to prophesy against Jerusalem, the Israelites who remained within the walls of that city most likely never heard any of Ezekiel's messages, albeit one sent by messenger, which we can read in Jeremiah 29–33. Inside Jerusalem, Jeremiah served as prophet. Ezekiel is over seven hundred miles away in Babylon with fellow Israelite prisoners who had been captured by King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel is also an exile in Babylon, serving as a captive in Nebuchadnezzar's royal court. Ezekiel's messages inform his fellow captors of the judgment and subsequent restoration God will bring to the city of Jerusalem along with His plans for them as political prisoners.

Before we delve too deeply into Ezekiel's prophecies, we ought to clarify a few things. God will often command Ezekiel to "speak to my people Israel," but at this point in history, as we saw in the earlier synopsis, Israel does not actually exist, since they are a conquered nation. When King Solomon died, the nation was divided over which son would ascend to the throne, resulting in the nation of Israel's splitting into northern and southern sections, in effect, two kingdoms. The north retained the name Israel and the southern portion was referred to as Judah. In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered the tribes in the north (Israel) while Judah still remained an independent nation. Now Judah had been overcome by the king of Babylon, and the exiles wondered when and how this king, who had ordered their captivity, would be defeated. God referring to His people as "Israel" proves significant, because from God's vantage point, the nation of Israel will certainly exist again, and His people will inhabit it. For God to refer to Ezekiel's exilic audience as "Israel" heralded God's intent to eventually return them to their land and restore Israel as a nation. This would have proved comforting to them and reminded them of God's faithfulness.

We also need to remember that Ezekiel is not speaking to the people who are still living in Judah and Jerusalem; he is only speaking to his fellow exiles in Babylon, who have been deported from Judah as political prisoners. They were not actually locked up in cells in the way we think of a modern-day prison. But they were removed from their homeland and forced to move to another country. It might be difficult for us today to understand what this would entail, but what we must understand is that for the Jew, this development meant more than mere relocation and leaving all that was familiar to them behind (as traumatic as that in itself was). Removal from Jerusalem meant their inability to offer sacrifices in the temple. This proved devastating, since sacrificial worship in the temple was their sole means of securing God's favor and being absolved of sins. Furthermore, Jewish religious laws held rigid guidelines regarding social interaction among Gentiles and regarding food consumption. For those who had lived within the confines of Jerusalem and its surrounding countryside their entire lives, being surrounded by pagan temples, people of foreign tongue, and religious customs far different from their Jewish heritage would have been shocking to them. To be removed from their prescribed

way of worshiping equated to their feeling of being out of favor with God. The captivity indeed was disastrous for the Jews.

READ EZEKIEL 2:1–10.

What did God command Ezekiel to do?

What emotion might Ezekiel succumb to in fulfilling this call?

To what unpleasant creature did God compare His people Israel?

(The ESV in verse 6 says “you sit on” and the NIV² uses the words “you live among.” Either way, it’s not a compliment!)

What did God command Ezekiel to eat?

Ezekiel beheld the radiance, majesty, and glory of God, witnessing His mighty angels ready and willing to do His bidding. God prepared Ezekiel for this call by first showing him the utter awesomeness of Who He Is. Think about your own prayer life and how you imagine God. How do you most often envision Jesus?

Sitting on a rock with little children around Him.

Holding a lamb.

Hanging on the cross.

In His glorified state.

Another way?

What if we pictured Jesus in His glorified state as Ezekiel did? How would that change our prayers, our faith, our submission and obedience to Him, and our regard of His holiness? In order to fulfill the call God was placing on his life, Ezekiel needed to be reminded that he served a mighty and powerful God. As do we! When we de-escalate Christ, we elevate doubt and fear!

Isn't it interesting that Ezekiel is held captive by a wicked nation as an enemy Jew, but God knows that he will fear his own countrymen over the Babylonians? Sometimes when called to serve, we can fear our own brothers and sisters in the church more than the enemy all around us. You saw that God refers to Ezekiel's fellow Jews as scorpions. Since we live in Arizona, scorpions are a very familiar fear. We've experienced the unexpected sting of a scorpion more than once in our home, needing hours of recovery from the numbness and the ache. When I think of scorpions, several descriptors come to mind: silent, concealed, operate in the darkness, sting to kill and devour. That's a strange way to describe Ezekiel's fellow Israelites. A scorpion is a hard-to-see predator that emerges unexpectedly.

I would bet that some of us have been unknowingly attacked and stung by some "scorpions" from whom we least expected it. God informs Ezekiel ahead of time that these attacks will come, but He didn't give Ezekiel a pass to get out of his calling as a result. We might want to hang up our service hat because we have gotten stung somewhere in the church or by a brother or sister in Christ, but just like Ezekiel, we shouldn't be surprised when we suffer some unexpected stings. Has the memory of a previous ache caused you to shrink back in fear? Has numbness remained long afterward causing you to pull away from your brothers and sisters? Before we start diving more fully into Ezekiel's calling and subsequently our own, let's pause right here and invite God to bring some additional healing into that hurt.

Jot down any names or painful circumstances that come to mind, asking God to bring healing.

Just as we must believe God can bring healing to our hurt, so we must trust God to strengthen us to fulfill any call He places on us. (See especially Ezekiel 2:2, 4.) God raised Ezekiel up and gave him the words to speak. Scripture makes no mention of God choosing Ezekiel due to any particular gifts or abilities held by him. Maybe it was simply Ezekiel's willingness to obey. We must never attempt to serve our all-powerful God in our own feeble strength.

Think of your own life for a moment. Can you think of a time when God called you to serve in a manner that caused you to be fearful or you doubted your ability? Recall what happened and imagine how this story might encourage someone else.

Reread Ezekiel 2:1–8 and circle how many times God uses some form of the word “rebel.”

I think God used the word “rebellious” because He knew it would evoke an emotional response from Ezekiel's audience. They suffered the consequences of Israelite king Jehoiakim rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The futility of this revolt remained daily before their eyes. They had been stripped of their possessions, positions, families, and seemingly God's presence, as their king's rebellion resulted in their imprisonment.

I can't help but rejoice in the faithfulness of Yahweh. Despite their actions and reactions, He continued to pursue His people. Though the Israelites had rebelled against Him, He continued to speak, imploring them to listen.

Listening is a choice.

Will we choose to listen? We must posture ourselves to listen. Ezekiel fell on his face and then heard the Lord speak. He postured himself for revival.

READ EZEKIEL 2:8–10.

What did the Lord give Ezekiel?

What was written on it?

What was he to do with it?

Sometimes what the Lord gives us feels frightening, uncomfortable, or downright difficult. Surely Ezekiel would have much preferred messages of hope, love, and forgiveness to share with his people, but that wasn't what the Lord was asking of him.

Is the Lord asking something hard of you today? How does reflecting on God's faithfulness embolden and empower you?



Close today asking Jesus to expand your vision of Him—high and lifted up, seated in glory. Ask Him to posture your heart to listen to Him and grace to be obedient in whatever direction He places on your life. (Yes, I know this is similar to yesterday, but just like Ezekiel and the exiles, we'll need repeated reminders to become awakened to our great purpose!)

WEEK 1 | DAY 3

TOUGH TO SWALLOW

EZEKIEL 3:1–18

Mary Poppins quipped, “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” but Ezekiel needs to swallow words of lamentation, mourning, and woe! In other words, what God will command Ezekiel to share won’t be well received. It reminds me of when I have to tell my kids something I know they won’t want to hear. They tune me out and pretend they can’t hear me. When I force them to look at me so I can ensure they are actually listening, their eyes get that glazed-over look, letting me know that all they are actually processing sounds like, “Blah, blah blah, Mom’s barking orders again!” Rarely do they jump right up in instant obedience. It usually takes a few reminders and prodding, and some squashing of their excuses, before my teens rush to respond.

Think about Ezekiel’s audience for a moment, the thousands of captives. Their king, Jehoiakim, foolishly rebelled against Babylon, resulting in their deportation (2 Kings 24:14–16). They probably have left family members behind in Israel with whom they have no way of communicating. They are in a place of desperation. Now along comes Ezekiel, and he is going to speak to them words of lamentation, mourning, and woe—probably not on their top one hundred list of things they want to hear right now, and I’m sure Ezekiel knows it.

READ EZEKIEL 3:1–11.

God repeats His instructions to Ezekiel twice.

What does He tell Ezekiel to do first?

And then second?

How is the taste of the scroll described?

According to God, who would not listen to the messages sent, and who would?

With what phrase was Ezekiel to begin the messages?

What would God do for Ezekiel to enable him to faithfully deliver God's messages? (You might want to read vv. 8–9 in a couple of different versions.)

Does anyone else find it a bit odd that words of lamentation, mourning, and woe would taste as sweet as honey? The goodness of God turns even difficulty into victory, ravaging into restoration, and sadness to joy. In God's grace, He promised this to Ezekiel in the sweetness of the taste.

Ezekiel ate the scroll. He didn't just take the scroll from the Lord's hands, unroll it before the people and proclaim, "Thus says the LORD God!" He opened his mouth and he ate it and then the Lord said, "Go!" I think this order of events is significant. First of all, once he ate, the message became part of him. He fully committed himself to it. He filled himself with God's Word and then he went and spoke to the people.

The application here is simple: we too must first eat and then go. We cannot speak words of truth in our homes, churches, workplaces, and communities if we haven't eaten them ourselves by committing to fill our stomachs with God's Word.

God warns Ezekiel that the people most likely will not listen to his warnings or instructions. Ezekiel must be thrilled. God called him to stand up in front of his kinsmen, deliver a difficult message, and depend on their rejection. God explains, "But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me." Do you have someone in your life whose attention you are struggling to gain? Maybe it's a spouse, a stubborn child, a difficult boss, coworker, or friend. You are trying to speak truth into a person's life, but they refuse to listen. When we speak God's Word into a person's life and they reject the message, we should not take it personally. God spells out for us who they are ultimately rejecting.

READ JESUS' WORDS IN JOHN 15:18 AND 17:14.

What reactions did He receive to His message?

When we put ourselves out there trying to speak truth and the response is hurtful, we can know that Jesus understands. If you have someone you are trying to reach with truth, pray for that person right now. Ask God for the grace to release that person over to His care and to guard your heart from hurtful emotions.

Contrarily, those who would likely heed God's warnings to repent proved to be the opposite of whom we might think. Not Israelites, but foreigners. God would call Ezekiel to issue warnings to the surrounding nations inviting them to repent, just like He did Israel.

Read Psalm 119:18 and write it below.

Even God's warnings prove wonderful when we begin to understand their protection over us! When God places someone in our lives with whom we feel compelled to speak truth, we need to follow these directives God issued to Ezekiel:

1. Fear them not.
2. Receive God's Word in your heart and hear with your ears.
3. Tell them, "Thus says the Lord God . . ."

And then we pray, pray, pray! Don't give up on that person you long to see come to repentance. Ask God to harden your forehead and strengthen your resolve. God hasn't given up on Israel. He is committed to sending messages even though He knows very few of them will initially listen. We must have the same diligence in sharing His message of hope with a rebellious world!

WEEK 1 | DAY 4

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HARD

EZEKIEL 3:12–28

Discovering God’s will does not always prove to be easy. Often we question what God’s will is for our lives and how we know when we are in it. Well, in the case of Ezekiel, God left no room for doubt. He called Ezekiel with a miraculous vision and then gave him specific instructions for carrying out the call. Let’s review what God told him before we move into new territory.

In Ezekiel 3:9–11, God laid out three very clear directions:

1. Fear not your fellow Israelites.
2. Receive God’s Word in your heart and hear it with your ears.
3. Speak God’s Word(s) to the people.

If you are in a place where you desperately desire God to reveal His will to you in a certain area, pray through these commands of God. Are you harboring fear? Do you have a heart attitude that says, “Lord, I want to serve You, but please don’t ask

me to do *that*,” because you are afraid of what *that* might entail? God tells Ezekiel, do not “be dismayed at their looks.” In other words, do not fear their response or rejection. Maybe we need to bring some specific fears to the Lord before He is ready to make known His call to us. For someone who has a PhD in people-pleasing, I succumb to that fear of man’s rejection all too easily.

Second, God told Ezekiel to receive God’s Word with his heart and listen carefully with his ears. The numbing effects of familiarity easily settle in and, while God is speaking plain as day to us through an all too familiar passage, we sit back expecting Him to unveil some divine mystery we hadn’t seen before. Occasionally God desires that which is familiar to our eyes to prick our heart anew with fresh wonder. Other times we get so busy telling the Lord all that we want Him to do that we fail to listen. Could it be that the Lord is already speaking, stirring our heart and prompting a passion, but we refuse to slow down long enough to let the truth penetrate through all of our noise? In our entire reading of Ezekiel thus far, how many words has Ezekiel spoken? None! He has done nothing but listen!

Third, God told him, “Speak to them and say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD.”” That word “speak” insinuates going after to discourse with them. We might say, “Go find so and so and say . . .” God instructs Ezekiel to be intentional about delivering His messages, not sit back and wait for the people to come seek him out. If I’m honest, I often want God to lay out the plans and then I’ll get going. I don’t want to move forward, sideways, or seemingly backward without first understanding why God is placing me there. God demanded Ezekiel to first seek out and then to speak up.

I recently met a dear friend for lunch. She recounted how all summer long she had been on her face before the Lord asking Him where He wanted her to serve now that she was a new empty nester. I was floored at what she then told me about the call God had for her. Her church was starting up a new ministry to combat inner-city sex trafficking. They would open a safe house where victims could be fed and clothed, where they would learn new skills so they could get off the street and support themselves, and most important, would learn about Christ. Now,

I can only speak for myself, but I find it most unlikely God would call me to such a ministry if my habit was to devote five quick minutes scanning through a chapter in my Bible followed by a seven-minute prayer. Why? Not because God couldn't do it, but because the idea of going to downtown Los Angeles and walking the streets befriending women who had been through some very tough stuff would scare me to death. Instead, it would take serious time before the Lord, bringing before Him my fears, listening to Him speak to me through His Word, and receiving all He said in my heart before my scaredy-cat selfishness would be pierced through to respond to Him in such radical obedience!

If you're floundering, wondering what it is the Lord might have for you, do what my friend did. No quick to-do list for her. Get down on your face before the Lord. Seek Him daily in the Scriptures. And this study is a great place to start!

READ EZEKIEL 3:12–16.

List the emotions Ezekiel experiences after this vision.

For how long did Ezekiel sit and process all he had seen and heard?

God asked Ezekiel to do something very difficult. He hinted that the results might be minimal. We don't actually know what Ezekiel is thinking, but in my humanness, I imagine it might sound something like this: *Really, God? Isn't it bad enough that I've already been exiled, taken far away from home, stuck here with no purpose or future, and now on top of it, God, You are asking me to do this?*

I mean, try and think of ten people you know who would be ecstatic about this call on their lives!

Can't even think of two? Yeah, me neither!

No wonder he's bitter. He is going to suffer because of others' sin, namely, the sin of those he is now called to serve. He is called to bring them messages from God—think of it—because they had not been listening to God. Not an easy task.

I'm sure some of us can relate. We have had someone in our lives who refuses to listen to God, and their consequences spill over onto us and we feel like it's unfair. We become bitter and wonder why we should have to suffer because of someone else's sin or stupidity.

Want to witness the neon sign of God's will? When it goes beyond our emotional ability to do it, beyond our mental ability to conceive it, and beyond our spiritual ability to desire it, it's generally God's idea.

Ezekiel needed to 100 percent depend on God to fulfill this call on his life. If what God calls us to doesn't have a bit of hard, doesn't ruffle our feathers or go beyond logical understanding, then we might be tempted to serve in our own flesh. Difficulty demands dependence and that's where God sticks His servants—in a place desperate for His power to come through. We ought not ever serve our almighty God through feeble human wisdom or frail strength.

Can you think of a hard season of your life? Describe your dependence on God at that time.

I love God's patience with Ezekiel at the conclusion of this vision. He sat for seven days—the customary mourning period. Remember the scroll of lamenting, mourning, and woe? God allowed Ezekiel to process the incredible vision and call he experienced. Life for Ezekiel was about to dramatically change, even beyond the difficulty and suffering he had already endured the last five years.

READ EZEKIEL 3:16–21.

Paraphrase what you think God’s message to Ezekiel’s fellow exiles includes.

READ EZEKIEL 3:22–27.

How would Ezekiel know he was only speaking God’s words and not his own?

READ JOHN 16:12–15.

Who else only speaks the words of God?

For all the times I’ve stuck my foot in my mouth, what a relief to be saved from my own tongue! Ezekiel never need wonder if the message on his heart was to be shared or kept silent. God would open his mouth or shut it.

One thing we know we are continually commanded to share is the message of the glorious gospel of grace. How serious are we about that? On a scale from 1 to 5, where do you most readily fall?

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Can’t remember the last time I’ve shared</i>				<i>Every chance I get!</i>

Sharing the message of Jesus' salvation might feel too hard or unfair. We might grow afraid of messing up or facing rejection. But it's our calling. If you landed on number one or maybe number two, go back to the beginning of today's homework and follow the three steps God outlined for Ezekiel. The gospel ought to always be on the tip of our tongue!

WEEK 1 | DAY 5

A PICTURE PAINTS A THOUSAND WORDS

EZEKIEL 4

We have probably all heard that expression about a picture a thousand times. Have you ever processed the truth of it? In Phoenix there used to be an anti-drug campaign that displayed billboards along our freeways. One of them haunted me every time I saw it. A mother was sitting on a chair beaten to the point of being barely recognizable. The caption read: “My mother knows I’d never hurt her, but then she got in the way.” I found the image so disturbing my stomach turned each time I passed by. Now, if I passed a billboard that merely read, “Don’t take drugs, they make you violent,” I doubt that would evoke the same emotional and physical response in me. But the bruised and battered mother sitting despondently pierces me right to the heart. We are visual creatures, and the images we rest our eyes on become stamped in our memory, eliciting emotions deep within.

Our Creator knows how visual we are; He made us that way. So, in order to get the exiles’ attention, God doesn’t tell Ezekiel to stand on the corner and talk at them. He is going to have Ezekiel paint a picture for them to capture their curiosity and evoke an emotional reaction.

READ EZEKIEL 4:1–17.

How many words does Ezekiel speak?

Describe the scene he constructs in verses 1–4.³

What did Ezekiel lying on his left side and then his right side symbolize?

What was Ezekiel to do with his arm while acting this out?

How was he to eat and drink while lying there?

What did God concede so that Ezekiel did not defile himself by eating food that was unlawful?

Okay, we thought the visions were weird and confusing! What in the world is happening here? Let me break down a few things to help us make sense of this. Ezekiel was to take a clay brick and erect siege ramps around it. The brick symbolized the city of Jerusalem, which would be under siege by Nebuchadnezzar and eventually burned to the ground. Interestingly, clay becomes stronger

when placed under fire. God's message to the exiles included the promise of a future strength at the end of their punishment. Iron represented the strongest element. The Jewish people believed that nothing could ever match the strength of Jerusalem because the Lord Himself dwelt there. However, God says that Jerusalem will fall.

Now for the numbers. God claims that the sin of Israel began 390 years ago. Read 1 Chronicles 21:1–17 and note what sin David had committed 390 years before and how God felt about it.

This sin highlights a shift in David's thinking from a complete and utter dependence on the Lord to pride and self-sufficiency. Not only are these sins often difficult to detect in our lives, but we also live in a culture that applauds them. We tend to distance ourselves from needy people and prefer to gravitate toward those who seem to have it all together. We like to associate with success. Our natural bent is also to try and fix things on our own. We'll work out how to take care of this bill or juggle the new schedule, or we read self-help books to make our marriage better and hire tutors to help our children succeed in school. Not that any of those things are bad per se, but it's often after we've exhausted all of our own resources and knowledge that we turn to the Lord for help.

What is a relationship or area of your life you often find yourself trying to fix in your own strength?

Why do you think your actions might grieve the Lord?

How long was Ezekiel to lie on his side the second time?

These periods of judgment represent two different things. The 390 years represent the span of time Israel had claimed self-sufficiency apart from God. The forty years represented the length of time Judah would be punished for this. As we've noted, by this time in Israel's history, the nation of Israel had been split in two, with ten of the original twelve tribes now comprising Israel, the northern kingdom, and the other two tribes comprising the southern kingdom, Judah. The northern portion, Israel, had already been captured over a hundred years prior by the Assyrians. Only the southern kingdom of Judah remains an independent nation, although they paid heavy tribute to the Babylonian king. For forty years God planned to punish the nation of Judah.

Read Exodus 6:6 and note what God would accomplish with bared or outstretched arm:

READ DEUTERONOMY 4:32–35.

What would God prove to the nation of Israel by the work of His bared or outstretched arm?

God bared His arm to deliver His people out of captivity from Egypt. Now His bared arm would drive them into captivity to refine and strengthen them. His purpose however remained constant: that His people would know that He is the Lord. God will repeat this purpose to His people over fifty times throughout the messages of Ezekiel.

Remember how we started today saying that a picture paints a thousand words? God's message to the exiles runs contrary to their thinking. They believed Jerusalem would forever remain impenetrable and secure and that God would soon deliver the exiles back to their promised land in a dramatic defeat of Nebuchadnezzar. God conjures up a vivid word picture to snap them back into reality. Their thinking is faulty.

Before you close your study book today, pause and ask the Lord to show you where any faulty thinking has crept into your own life. Is there an area of pride or self-sufficiency where you have ceased to depend on the Lord for your care? Maybe you have allowed standards to slip and you have defiled yourself as Ezekiel cried out against to the Lord (4:14).

Are you:

Neglecting family?

Demonstrating financial irresponsibility?

Partnering with people with questionable commitments to the Lord's will for their lives?

Avoiding confrontation?

Turning a blind eye to sin?

Not speaking up for the truth?

Continuing to pursue an unhealthy or destructive habit?

God longs to purify His people and have them depend on Him for their care and provision. Let's not allow faulty thinking to creep in and require fire to strengthen and cleanse us, or punishment to bring us to repentance. Instead, let's ask God to search our hearts today and resolve to allow Him to deliver us from any cords of sin that have begun to entangle us. Revival starts with inviting the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and provide inner reflection.

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