



SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRY

Discipleship Plan

Year Seven
Ezekiel Lessons
Part 2

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Lesson 5: A Tale of Two Cities: Oholah and Oholibah (Ezekiel 23)	Page 3
Lesson 6: If You Want the Job Done Right... (Ezekiel 34)	Page 4
Lesson 7: Preview of Coming Attractions – The Everlasting Covenant (Ezekiel 37)	Page 5
Lesson 8: The Enduring and Glorious Presence of God (Ezekiel 23)	Page 6
Article: A New Most Holy Place	Page 7
Article: The Lord Returns to His Temple	Page 9

Lesson 5: A Tale of Two Cities: Oholah and Oholibah (Ezekiel 23)

Primary Verse: “The LORD said to me: ‘Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Declare to them their abominations. For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands. With their idols they have committed adultery, and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me. Moreover, this they have done to me: they have defiled my sanctuary on the same day and profaned my Sabbaths.” (Ezekiel 23:36-38 ESV)

Teaching Text: Ezekiel 23

Supporting Texts: Ezekiel, chapters 16 and 22

The sin of Israel and Judah, focused on their capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem, has been portrayed in terms of an allegory of Oholah and Oholibah. The depth of the treachery, sinking into the mire of prostitution and adultery, is shocking. God’s Old Testament assembly has committed the gravest of transgressions against the covenant. She has violated the bond of marriage.

Dr. Derek Thomas

Why isn’t the Old Testament famous for its allegories or parables? Perhaps, we prefer Jesus’ parables. Or, perhaps, the Old Testament’s lengthy analogies are too hard to swallow. The prophet Ezekiel stands apart as one before the human history of Christ whose ministry depended largely on thinly disguised allegorical and parabolic imagery. Chapters 15, 16, 17, 24, and 27 all stand out as examples of prophetic storytelling which communicate God’s judgment.

A Word to Oholah - Though the prophet Hosea refers to Samaria as a male “Ephraim,” his charge is equivalent to what Ezekiel says about Oholah, “he mixes with the nations” (Hosea 7:8). Refusing to trust in the Lord, Oholah has placed her confidence in Assyria. God’s judgment upon her is the starkest warning to us all: beware, lest the Lord abandon you to the evil desire of your heart! Oholah flirted with, and the KJV says, “doted on,” Assyria. Therefore, God gave her over to Assyria, who promptly savaged her.

A Word to Oholibah - This sister had her good moments, but in the end, the proverbial apple does not fall far from the tree. Even the good King Josiah fell victim to the foolish entanglements of this world, choosing ungodly alliances that sent him to his grave on a fool’s unnecessary errand (2 Chronicles 35:20-27). If good kings were enticed to make alliances with unbelievers, how much more do the evil ones? God’s people, therefore, ought to beware when their steps resemble the steps of the unfaithful—especially when the Lord has already made an example of the wicked! Thus, she is said to be more corrupt than Oholah (v. 11-14)!

Questions to Consider: How does Ezekiel 22:31b prepare us for chapter 23? Why are Oholah and Oholibah described as “daughters of the same mother?” In what sense had “whoring” began in or is in connection with Egypt (Ezekiel 23:7-8)? How does Jeremiah 2:36-37 compare with Ezekiel’s message in this chapter? Why do Jeremiah and Ezekiel often use the metaphor of whoredom to describe Judah/Israel?

Challenging the Class: Ezekiel 22:30 explains Judah fell for lack of one to “stand in the gap.” Which of your loved ones are you willing to allow God to destroy for your lack of intercession? Where prayer is absent, love is equally nonexistent. If we love God, so we speak **to** Him. If we love others, we will pray **for** them.

Lesson 6: If You Want the Job Done Right... (Ezekiel 34)

Primary Verse: “For thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.’” (Ezekiel 34:11-13 ESV)

Teaching Text: Ezekiel 34

Supporting Texts: Psalm 23, Isaiah 40:9-11, Jeremiah 23:1-15, Ezekiel 22

Remembering the physical environment of the Ancient Near East, Palestine in particular, will shape our understanding of why the figure of shepherding is often repeated in the Old Testament. Sheep, not typically fenced in, were helpless without protection, watering, shelter, grazing, and injury repair provided by a shepherd. The dependency of the sheep and the vast array of responsibilities of the shepherd make for a useful diagnostic to determine good leaders from bad ones. This chapter of Ezekiel gives us plenty of specifics to mark the overall self-centeredness of false shepherds and the selflessness of shepherds shaped by and molded after the heart of the Good Shepherd.

The context of Ezekiel’s ministry calls our attention to the determination of God to do right by His people in unimaginable ways, given the judgments pronounced against Judah and the destruction of Israel’s northern kingdom. In a sense, we can say those living in exile were extremely far from their familiar pastures. Yet, in their darkest hour, the Good Shepherd promised to bring them home. The faithful remnant of God’s people is to be gathered “from all the countries” where they live. They are to be unified as one and united to their Shepherd, Who will feed and care for them.

In a surprise twist, this chapter’s allusions to sheep and those who care for them include the mention and promised appearance of one who would be in the Shepherd’s Hall of Fame - King David! He is referred to as a shepherd elsewhere (2 Samuel 5:2), but amazingly, we are told “David” is to shepherd God’s people and be “prince” among them.

Questions to Consider: Can you discern how many tasks shepherds ought to undertake by the description of the bad shepherds in Ezekiel 34:1-10? Since we know the use of shepherding is metaphorical, how would you apply answers in the earlier question to leadership in the realm of the church? How should this realization impact the way you pray for your pastor? According to verses 17-21, who is responsible for judging bullying and abusive sheep? Who is identified as the coming shepherd in verses 11-16? Who does verse 23 identify as the future shepherd? Is there a contradiction? Why or why not?

Challenging the Class: With the possible exception of “Father,” is there one more enduring or endearing title as that of “Shepherd?” Since we know God is in that role, prayerfully, each of us is in the position of the sheep. This idea is most fundamental to the faith, for if we are the sheep, it is not we who found Him, but the Shepherd is the One Who found us. His act of gracious care - to pursue us when we were either casually straying or actively running away - is sufficient motivation for our obedience and service (and yet He has done much more than that!). Is God in the lead role of your life, or are you trying to shepherd yourself?

Lesson 7: Preview of Coming Attractions—The Everlasting Covenant (Ezekiel 37)

Primary Verse: “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And 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; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.’” (Ezekiel 37:11-14 ESV)

Teaching Text: Ezekiel 37

Supporting Texts: Exodus 36

We have all been there. When circumstances of life don't match up with our understanding of God's promises, doubt takes its cue to approach center-stage. Divine sovereignty and omnipotence are strange things to the mortal mind. God's ways cannot be fathomed because we don't think as He thinks (Isaiah. 55:8-9). We are at our most human when we are baffled by God's actions or, perhaps, His apparent *lack* of action. Our problem is simply this: we don't understand why God's ability doesn't coincide with His promise in our timing. Of course, one of the possessive pronouns from the last sentence is irrelevant, isn't it?

Can you put yourself in the pew, hearing Reverend Ezekiel preach about God shepherding the long-since destroyed ten northern tribes of Israel? Then, in almost the same breath, he declares God is appointing the long-gone David to rule over the united kingdom as if Judah weren't under siege and a host of Judeans weren't in Babylon? Yes, it is human to be baffled. But God has appointed help for our befuddlement.

Verse 12 begins with a thunderous, “therefore.” Why? Israel has had her say. God's people are expressing the most sensible and reasonable thing the human mind can comprehend by calculating their circumstances. As the saying goes, “It ain't over, till it's over.” As far as the exilic community in Babylon is concerned, “It's over.” Israel is dead and Judah is about to die, and they are cut off from the Land of Promise. God, however, plans a massive resurrection and reunification of Israel from the dead and from the countries where they are currently scattered. “Therefore,” he commands Ezekiel to “prophesy.” God's answer to our bewilderment is the proclamation of His Word.

Questions to Consider: Why does an omniscient God even bother to ask us questions? How does God's question in verse 3 function? Why does the word “I” pop up repeatedly in verses 11-14? Who brings new life to God's people? How many times are we told in this chapter God will make “one stick” out of the two? Compare David's appearance in this chapter with chapter 34. Do these two chapters describe a similar or a different picture of David's future role? Why does the shepherd imagery pop up again in this chapter? Is its use essentially the same as in chapter 34 or is it different? Is this prophecy fulfilled if “David” is not ruling? Is this prophecy fulfilled if God is not truly “their” God? How does Ezekiel 37:24-28 compare with Jeremiah 31:31-37?

Challenging the Class: How seriously do you take the preaching/teaching of God's word? Ezekiel 37 presents a clear picture of God's power to reverse death itself when His Spirit goes forth with His Word. Man does not live by bread alone, but the Christian does not live at all without God's word!

Lesson 8: The Enduring and Glorious Presence of God (Ezekiel 23)

Primary Verse: “and he said to me, ‘Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever. And the house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name, neither thy, nor their kings, by their whoring and by the dead bodies of their kings at their high places, by setting their threshold by my threshold and their doorposts by my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them. ... Now let them put away their whoring and the dead bodies of their kings far from me, and I will dwell in their midst forever.” (Ezekiel 43:6-9 ESV)

Teaching Text: Ezekiel 43

Supporting Texts: Ezekiel 40-42

For all the fearsome and seemingly odd imagery that Ezekiel shares with us, the beginning and end of the book have a beautiful and precise symmetry—God’s presence is the primary theme of both. The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery states it this way on page 257,

“God’s mobility prepares the reader for the departure of God’s glory from the temple in Ezekiel 10, in response to the abominations described in chapter 8—a slow, halting departure in an easterly direction, toward the exiles in Babylon. At the same time, however, God’s mobility also permits the hope that his glory will return in the same way that it went. The certainty of that hope is communicated in the vision of God’s glory returning to the new temple from the east, the direction in which it had earlier departed (Ezekiel 43:2)”

Though God is mobile, the clear teaching of Ezekiel 43 is a time is coming when God will dwell in the New Temple forever. Accordingly, His presence will finally rest forever among His people. In a sense, this picture of permanence fulfills the original purpose God had for His people. Namely, He would be their God and they would be His people. From the days of Eden, God had walked among humans such that Adam knew “the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden” (Genesis 3:8). But in Ezekiel’s vision, God promises a temple known as “the place of the soles of My feet” (Ezekiel 43:7)! God is determined to be united with His people, and that is good news!

Questions to Consider: What is established/explained by Ezekiel 43:3? Why would the bodies of dead kings be a problem in the temple area? Is Ezekiel’s elaborate vision a building plan for a new construction project in Israel’s future? Why or why not? Do verses 10 and 11 give us a clue as to the purpose behind the explanation of the temple vision? What does repetition generally imply or how does it usually function in the Bible? How similar or different are 43:10 and 43:11? A little more than half of the chapter is given to intricate details concerning the altar. How does the altar function to explain the human need for the temple? How is the temple related to the symbolic nature of the temple and what does the temple generally stand for? What does this chapter tell us about the kind of people who are prepared to witness such a temple?

Challenging the Class: Does Ezekiel’s response to the glory of the Lord seem strange to you? When was the last time you were overwhelmed by the beauty and presence of God? Is there any indication in scripture that God’s kindness or fatherly love overshadows/diminishes His awesome and powerful presence? How can we cultivate a sense of God’s grandeur without minimizing His nearness?

A New Most Holy Place

“He measured the length of the room, twenty cubits, and its breadth, twenty cubits, across the nave. And he said to me, “This is the Most Holy Place” (v. 4).

- Ezekiel 41:1–4

Under the old covenant, God made His presence known most strongly in the Most Holy Place, or Holy of Holies, the most sacred area of the tabernacle/temple. This presence among Israel was contingent upon the loyalty of the nation to the Law (2 Chron. 7:19–22), a loyalty that was seen the majority of time only in the lives of a holy remnant within the nation. Most Israelites failed to keep covenant and ended up defiling the temple, with the result that God moved out of the Holy of Holies (Ezek. 10) and allowed foreigners to burn the temple to the ground (2 Kings 25:1–21).

We can hardly overestimate the tragedy this must have been in the eyes of Ezekiel, who witnessed the temple’s destruction, for he was of the priestly lineage that served in the temple (Ezek. 1:3). Much of the book that bears his name is concerned with the threat of exile and the promise of judgment upon the people of God for their sins. But this is not all the book has to offer, as it also looks forward to the day when the Lord would restore His people and bless them once more. This is especially clear in Ezekiel’s vision of a renewed temple in chapters 40–48.

Today, many people believe this account of the temple is a blueprint for a literal temple that will be rebuilt in Jerusalem. This is an inappropriate reading, as the dimensions of this temple would make it impossible to be built according to the plan in chapters 40–48. We do not have the space to go into all the details, but if we were to add up all the measurements of the temple, we would get a length of 4,500 feet. Ancient Jerusalem could not have accommodated such a large building on Mt. Zion; it would have to extend outside of the city. Moreover, the imagery of a life-giving river and trees that bear fruit perpetually are clearly symbolic and thus expressive of the blessings that will flow from God’s sanctuary to all the earth (47:1–12).

What, then, do we learn from this vision of the new temple and new Holy of Holies in today’s passage? Keeping in mind that Ezekiel was a priest, a revelation of a grand temple was a clear way for the Lord to show him that there was yet a glorious future ahead for the faithful Israelites. Upon their restoration, God’s presence and glory would extend past the borders of Jerusalem to the outlying lands. All creation would be His temple, for all creation would then be holy (Isa. 11:9).

Coram Deo

What Ezekiel saw in a vision we now see in reality as the kingdom of God spreads across the earth and people from every tribe and tongue are set apart to be priests (1 Peter 2:9). The turning of the nations to Yahweh, the only God, is clear evidence that the Bible is true, for in Christ Jesus the prediction that all would worship Yahweh is coming to pass. What are you doing to faithfully proclaim the gospel?

Passages for Further Study

Psalm 22:27–31

Zechariah 14:16–19

Matthew 24:14

Acts 1:6–11

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The Lord Returns to His Temple

“As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple” (vv. 4–5).

- Ezekiel 43:1–12

Speaking to His old covenant people in terms they could understand, God inspired the prophet Ezekiel to describe a future temple that would be built when the Lord brought the people back to their land (Ezek. 40–42). As noted in yesterday’s study, various features of this structure indicate that God never meant for Israel to build the temple Ezekiel spoke of. Instead, the vision was a metaphorical way of telling the exiles that life in the restoration would recall the glory days of Solomon and his magnificent temple in Jerusalem. Though there had been much suffering in exile, God would resurrect the nation and bless it in a manner that would far surpass anything it had yet experienced.

Ezekiel 43:1–12 confirms this in the prophet’s vision of the Creator’s glory filling the new post-exilic temple. In the Old Testament, the phrase *glory of the LORD* often describes the visible manifestation of the divine presence as an overwhelming cloud that signifies God’s approval. For example, the glory cloud filled Solomon’s temple, conveying to the people that the Lord was pleased with the structure and would meet there with His people (2 Chron. 7:1–3). This cloud is exactly what Ezekiel saw in the vision he describes in today’s passage.

The prophet’s original audience must have found this vision particularly encouraging. Recall that earlier in his ministry, Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord leave the temple, signifying the withdrawal of His protection from Jerusalem, His judgment on the people, and the coming fall of the city to Babylon (Ezek. 10–11). Would God abandon His people forever? This was the question that this original vision provoked. The vision of the glory’s return represents a resounding “no.” For His own name sake, to prove that He had not lied when He promised to bless Abraham, the Lord had to return (36:16–38; see Gen. 15). God did not have to save anyone, but once He made a covenant with the patriarch, He was bound by His own nature to keep His promises. Thus, Matthew Henry comments, “Though God may forsake his people for a small moment, he will return with everlasting loving-kindness.”

As God’s glory had departed to the east, it would return to the temple from the east (Ezek. 43:4). In its return, it would purify the nation. Following the restoration from exile, the nation would no longer practice harlotry, that is, idolatry. Neither would it venerate

deceased kings (vv. 6–9). The return would be a new start with a cleansed people not marked by the sins that sent them and their forefathers into exile in the first place.

Coram Deo

The various elements of Ezekiel's vision in today's passage are not meant to be taken in an absolutely literal sense, so we are not surprised that there is no record of the glory cloud returning to the post-exilic temple. But God's glory did return to His temple six hundred years after this vision when the incarnate Son of God came and cleansed it (Mark 11:15–20), showing the Lord's judgment on the impenitent in the restored community and alluding to His work of cleansing us from sin.

Passages for Further Study

Psalm 11

Malachi 3:1–4

John 2:13–22

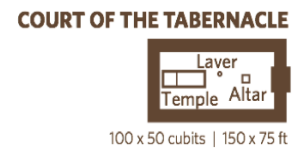
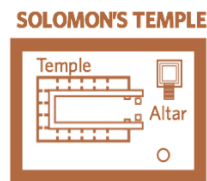
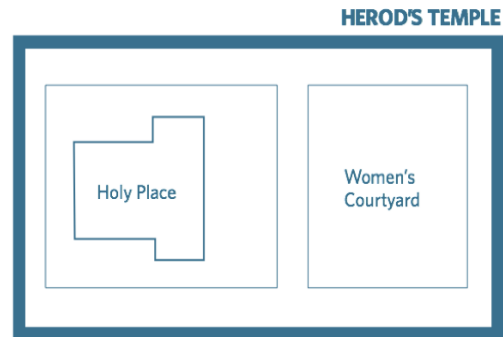
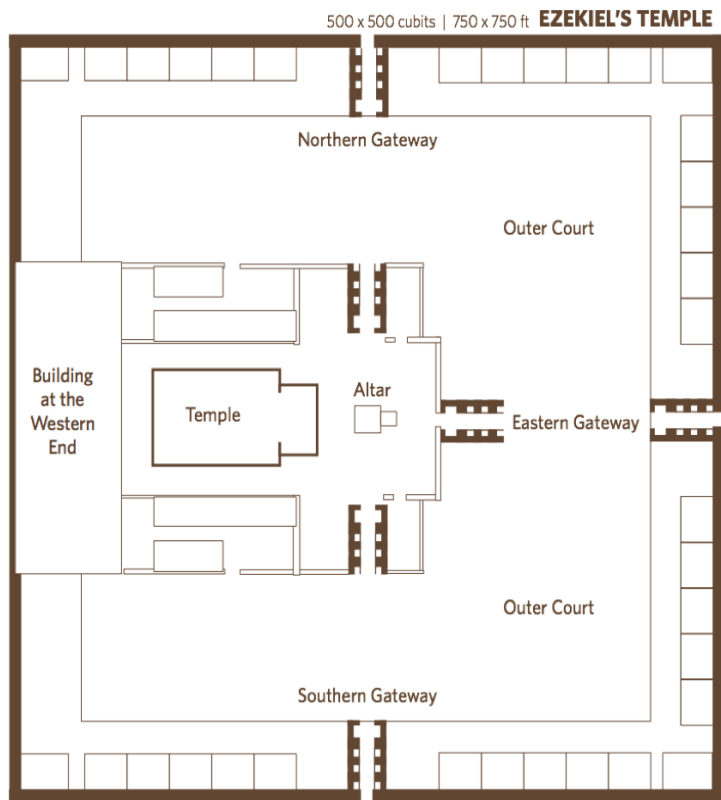
Revelation 3:7–13

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