

EZEKIEL'S SIGNS

Terrance didn't care if his lips were moving. He didn't care what people would think as he sat in the provost's office. He was praying, hard.

Terrence received notification from his university three days prior that he was facing academic suspension. His grade point average was now 1.6. He had been on academic warning and academic probation. After not raising his grade point to 2.0, he would probably be placed on suspension.

Terrence wasn't even a bad student, in many ways. "You have poor time management skills. You goof off, and you are always wanting someone else to bail you out!" his sister said. "God can't help you if you don't do the work, if you don't apply yourself."

But that was exactly what Terrence wanted God to do—to rescue him! *I need you, Lord. Touch the hearts of this academic committee and let them put me back on academic warning or probation.*

With a warning or more probation, Terrence could continue his second year of school uninterrupted. But with a suspension, he would have to pause for one semester, then reapply. His mother would never understand. He would lose his scholarship.

It's not like Terrence went out drinking. But he was choosing his friends and extra-curricular activities over studying and going to class.

Lord, if you get me out of this, prayed Terrence, I promise I will change. I will apply myself. I will study hard. I will get my grades up.

1 When have you neglected to care for something important?

2 Do we always face the consequences for our choices? Why or why not?

3 How can love of "freedom" distract or mislead us?

¹⁰ Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thine heart, and hear with thine ears. ¹¹ And go, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people, and speak unto them, and tell them, Thus saith the Lord God; whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear.

¹⁵ Also the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, ¹⁶ Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke: yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down. ¹⁷ Forbear to cry, make no mourning for the dead, bind the tire of thine head upon thee, and put on thy shoes upon thy feet, and cover not thy lips, and eat not the bread of men.

¹⁸ So I spake unto the people in the morning: and at even my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded.

¹⁰ And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. ¹¹ Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.”

¹⁵ The word of the LORD came to me:

¹⁶ “Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. ¹⁷ Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners.”

¹⁸ So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

The Word of the Lord

Ezekiel 3:10–11 concludes the account of the prophet’s call. After seeing the divine throne chariot (Ezek. 1:1–28), Ezekiel receives his commission to preach to God’s people. God tells Ezekiel to speak the truth without worrying about the response (Ezek. 2:3–7). In his vision, Ezekiel receives and eats a scroll that tastes sweet as honey, even though it contains “lamentations, and mourning, and woe” (Ezek. 2:8–3:3). God gives Ezekiel the strength to confront a hard-hearted people; he must share God’s message without fear (Ezek. 3:8–9; compare Jer. 1:17–19).

God addresses him as a “son of man,” which highlights Ezekiel’s low status before the God who is choosing him as messenger. The commands to “receive [God’s words] in thine heart, and hear with thine ears” (v. 10 KJV) emphasize that Ezekiel must embody the

divine message. Unlike Jeremiah, who prophesied while in Judah, Ezekiel is with fellow exiles who have now been resettled to regions of Babylon (see 2 Kings 24:10–17). His responsibility is to relay God’s words, regardless of whether the people will hear and obey.

Ezekiel 24:15–27 jumps forward to describe one of Ezekiel’s final “sign acts.” Sign acts are like visual parables that deliver a divine message in dramatic fashion (see also Hos. 1:2–9; Jer. 43:8–13; Ezek. 5:1–4; 12:1–16). Some of Ezekiel’s signs cost him dearly (Ezek. 4:4–6), but none more than the death of his wife. God tells Ezekiel, “I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes” (v. 16). God says that He shall use the death of Ezekiel’s wife for a particular purpose, and that evening, she passes away (v. 18). The text does not say how or whether she was previously ill, and the passage does not provide enough information to justify speculations. Ezekiel is losing the person most dear to him.

Worse yet, Ezekiel is not allowed to grieve publicly for his wife. God explicitly forbids him from weeping or shedding tears (v. 16). The Hebrew phrase translated “forebear to cry” (v. 17 KJV) or “groan quietly” (NIV) is difficult. It may mean that Ezekiel should express sorrows only to himself, or only in wordless groans, rather than cries. Moreover, Ezekiel must not dress himself like a person in mourning. Rather than throw dust on his head, he must wear his turban and his sandals as if nothing has changed (v. 17). He must leave his mouth uncovered, and he must refuse customary food of mourners. Until we hear the explanation to follow, we do not know why God is asking Ezekiel to throw off all customary ways of mourning.

1 What are Ezekiel’s duties as a prophet?

2 What is a “sign act,” and what is its purpose?

3 What does God tell Ezekiel to do when his wife dies?

¹⁹ And the people said unto me, Wilt thou not tell us what these things are to us, that thou doest so?

²⁰ Then I answered them, The word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

²¹ Speak unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will profane my sanctuary, the excellency of your strength, the desire of your eyes, and that which your soul pitieth; and your sons and your daughters whom ye have left shall fall by the sword.

²² And ye shall do as I have done: ye shall not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men. ²³ And your tires shall be upon your heads, and your shoes upon your feet: ye shall not mourn nor weep; but ye shall pine away for your iniquities, and mourn one toward another. ²⁴ Thus Ezekiel is unto you a sign: according to all that he hath done shall ye do: and when this cometh, ye shall know that I am the Lord God.

²⁷ In that day shall thy mouth be opened to him which is escaped, and thou shalt speak, and be no more dumb: and thou shalt be a sign unto them; and they shall know that I am the LORD.

¹⁹ Then the people asked me, “Won’t you tell us what these things have to do with us? Why are you acting like this?”

²⁰ So I said to them, “The word of the LORD came to me: ²¹ Say to the people of Israel, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary—the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword.’ ²² And you will do as I have done. You will not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners. ²³ You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves. ²⁴ Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.’

²⁷ At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the LORD.”

The Message Explained

After witnessing Ezekiel’s astonishing behavior—his reserved attitude toward his wife’s death—the people say, “Tell us what these things have to do with us” (v. 19). The sign act has done its job, opening up the people to hear a message. The strangeness of Ezekiel’s past behavior and history of enacting signs make them suspect that

there is a message behind Ezekiel's composure. Ezekiel begins his answer with "the word of the LORD came to me" (v. 20), a common introduction to a revelation in the Old Testament (see Gen. 15:1, 4; 2 Sam. 7:4; 24:11; Jer. 1:4; 2:1). This speaking formula shows the divine authority behind the messenger, which enables Ezekiel to boldly declare, "Thus sayeth the Lord God" (v. 21 KJV). Ezekiel calls the exiles of Judah, and he addresses them as "the house of Israel" (v. 21 KJV), a recognition of their common heritage in Abraham's family.

Ezekiel interprets and explains his sign. Just as Ezekiel lost his wife—"the desire of [his] eyes" (v. 16)—the exiles are about to lose "the desire of [their] eyes," the temple in Jerusalem and the lives of their family in and around Jerusalem (v. 21). News will soon arrive that the Babylonians have destroyed Solomon's temple. This is the decree of God, who takes full responsibility for profaning His own sanctuary. God is not powerless to prevent this, but He is allowing it to happen.

Because of Judah's persistent idolatry, it might seem odd to call God's temple "the stronghold in which you take pride" (v. 21). But even the exiles believed that the temple's persistence guaranteed God's favor. They expected to return, or at least that their distant families would survive in Judah. Ezekiel crushes these hopes: the temple will crumble and many of their children will die.

In verses 22–24, Ezekiel explains his odd behavior. Just as he avoided public displays of his grief, so shall the exiles. They will continue in their daily lives, permitted only to groan over their iniquities, rather than to properly mourn their loss. As exiles in the heart of the Babylonian empire, they will not have the luxury of grieving what Nebuchadnezzar will declare a victory. When word of these horrors reaches them, they will know that this is God's judgment (vv. 24, 27).

1 What is the meaning applied to the death of Ezekiel's wife?

2 Why does God send the exiles a message about mourning? How does this connect to what they shall do?

Messages to a People in Exile

If you are like me, when you read the words of today's text, you might have a strong reaction. It seems unlike what we expect when approaching God. Then again, the consequences for our actions always feel harsh.

What I notice from this text is, *God is still speaking to His people in exile*. It is a simple observation, right? But think about what it meant for them to hear news of their families' deaths and the end of Judah's kingdom! It would feel as if their world was coming apart, and the silence of God would have been deafening.

But God is not silent, even to a people in exile. God prepares them to face the realities of life in a foreign land, without the freedom to grieve. They have the opportunity to see their own need for reformation. God keeps sending prophetic messengers to share His word.

Equally today, God is not silent, to a people living in exile. First Peter 1:1 addresses an audience of Christians, "exiles," who live as out of step with the world around them. In a different sense, we are exiles too.

In the eyes of the world, we grieve for the wrong things. First, we grieve for our failures, our inadequacies, and the ways our witness falls short. Second, we grieve for others. As a people called to justice and mercy, we see injustice all around. Finally, we groan inwardly because we await God's kingdom (Rom. 8:23). We know that God is not done with this world; He is not done with us.

To everyone else around us, none of this makes sense. "Take care of yourself! Live your life! This world is all we've got." Maybe you've heard a response like this and felt out of step with the world around you. That is life in exile. But where is God when His people are in exile? He is there, speaking.

1 What is one hopeful message that we can take from today's text, which covered the consequences for sin?

2 Where is God when His people are in exile?

3 What is one way that you have felt out of step with the world around you?

Grieved for What Grieves God

Unlike the people in today's lesson, we are free to grieve. We do not have to hide our dismay at things that are out of step with God's design. Has God been showing you any particular injustice or need in the world? Or has your heart been grieved by something you have done?

Write a brief prayer of lament for something that grieves God. You might lament your own sin and weakness, or you might lament the needs you see in the world, with a particularly issue in mind.

Key Text

Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thine heart, and hear with thine ears.
—Ezekiel 3:10 KJV

And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you.”
—Ezekiel 3:10 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of November 17 through November 22

Mon. 1 Peter 4:1–11—Love Others Despite Suffering.

Tue. 1 Peter 4:12–19—Rejoice to Share Christ's Sufferings.

Wed. Ezekiel 18:1–9—Each Will Answer for His or Her Sin.

Thu. Psalm 38:1–2, 10–22—I Confess My Iniquity.

Fri. Galatians 6:1–10—Restore One Another in Gentleness.

Sat. Matthew 7:1–6—See to Your Own Sins First.

Next Week: Ezekiel 33:7–16a

Next week we will continue to discuss Ezekiel's role as a “watchman” for God's people. What is something that you watch for?