

Ezekiel: The Creation of A Symbol

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Introduction

This study is intended to be read not as a polished document, but as notes for a study of the man who, more than any other save Jesus, was intended to be seen as a symbol by those who heard him. Such an understanding would not take away from his literality as an historic figure nor to diminish his own personal suffering through the process. On the other hand, it shows that when God marks a human being to be a symbol, He will do with him or her as He wishes to accomplish His ends and to convey His messages.

It should be noted that such a person probably will not be marked by ease or pleasantness of life in general; but that one way we can identify such a one as having been marked by God would be his or her ultimate acceptance of being touched by God in such a manner. Though prophets and symbols are human beings and can cry out against the pain they suffer, their lives viewed as wholes would show that they feel honored by being used by God in such an overt way.

Background on the book of Ezekiel and his life

His period of prophecy as recorded in the book lasted 22 years, figured by calculating the dates given in the book.

He was orderly about the arrangement of his materials (unlike the book of Jeremiah) and meticulous about dating his visions. He saw the date of the captivity of Jehoachin king of Judah as being pivotal since he tied all the events and visions to that point in history. Perhaps as much as any prophet (and much like Luke in the New Testament) he desired that God be viewed as active in human history. However, at the time of his obedience to God in reifying the symbols, the activity was only visible in his body – in his personal experience. Only in the future would those symbols – captivity, exile, etc. – become part of the experience of those who at first merely observed the symbols.

His message was, in the main, rejected; and God prepared him for that fact. His effectiveness was in his obedience in portraying symbolically the realities God entrusted to him. As a preacher, we have no evidence that his teachings were particularly convicting or measurably effective on his listeners when they first heard them.

However, we do know that they eventually understood: over and over God repeated, "then they will know that I am God." Another thing they would, by implication, know would be the authority of Ezekiel to say what he said. After all, the people were in captivity because they had believed and acted on the assurances by false prophets that they would not be taken away and that Jerusalem would not fall.

One theme of the book of Ezekiel is the convergence of the invisible and the visible. Just as the wheels of the heavenly carriage in chapter one rest on the earth while conveying heavenly beings, the prophecies and symbols Ezekiel is to portray show that God's sovereign invisible will shall surely be played out in historical circumstances. (Hence, perhaps, the emphasis on dating the visions.) There will be only one purpose for them--to show the glory of God so that people will know His power and identity. The salvation of individuals, even the redemption of the nation as a whole, are secondary to the primary purpose of establishing His power and identity.

One illustration of this is that, although he teaches individual responsibility for sin (chapter 18), and though the corporate sin of the nation of Israel had led to the Shekinah glory of God leaving the temple, it apparently was not their repentance or change that led to His return of glory to the temple. Again, overarching and global and pantemporal purposes are being played out, all with the goal of showing unmistakably His power and causing people to "know" that He is God.

This implacability of God, seen in this book by messages of doom that will not be assuaged, shows God's justice toward sin. It emphasizes that all events on earth, everything from those meteorological to the socio-political realities of an exile, are foreknown by God and under His control. The symbols are sealed-up, bound-to-happen representations of inexorable future events. Apparently unlike the conditional prophecies of Jeremiah which could be averted by repentance, the prophecies of Ezekiel are marked by a sense of inevitability of national destruction, with the hope held out of individual change linked securely to the sense of responsibility for warning one another (chapter 3).

It is notable that the messages of doom continue until the fall of Jerusalem. At that point, Ezekiel's messages are those of hope. This is reminiscent of King David who mourned and fasted until Bathsheba's son died; and at that point, he arose and washed himself and went to the temple to worship. He, like Ezekiel, knew a freedom that is born out of human helplessness, for it is at this point that God can act unmistakably and powerfully without our interference.

There is no happenstance and no caprice in the mind of God. He shows justice in exiling the people, He shows mercy in bringing them back.

God's desire that people know Him shows up in two ways in this book. They will know, as He repeats over 90 times in the book, that He is God because of His announced purposes and fulfillment of symbols in the real world. Further, as He later reveals, He wants people to know Him personally, through other means that the new covenant will bring about.

This book ties the idea of glory to the temple. When God leaves it, the glory leaves it. I want to explore what the establishment of a new temple could mean in terms of power and glory.

Some observations about Ezekiel himself

It is assumed that he was not of the poorer classes since those were the ones left in the Holy Land, and we find him at the opening of the book among the exiles by the Kebar River.

Special attention is given to how God addresses him, as "son of man." In one sense this ties him to the rest of humanity, and as the book will show, to the forces that God will exert upon a group of people. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, he is identified with the coming Savior who would be also called Son of man.

Ezekiel was also the son of his father, Buzi. Buzi means "my shame." Thus Ezekiel was son of a type of shame of his fathers--those who had through their unfaithfulness brought about the wrath of God upon them which was exemplified by the Exile. Buzi was also a priest, and perhaps God was showing how the priesthood, which was supposed to represent man's case before God, had become shameful and ineffective.

Ezekiel kept himself for the Lord from his youth (4:14). Like David, God caused him to trust in Him from his mother's breast. Though he married, he had no children; and even his beloved wife was taken from him. This was a man marked by God for a purpose, and his emergence into a symbol that could be apprehended by the human mind was part of this purpose for his existence. As God showed Jeremiah, He takes human personality and will and molds it like malleable clay, remaking it until it takes the form He wants. Ezekiel was able to submit to the reworking and molding process and thus became the symbol God intended. He is contrasted to the other Israelites who too became symbols, even to unbelievers, of the power of God exerted upon the disobedient. As Romans 8:28 teaches, Christians can have a different set of experiences than others, even when they are all in the same situation, so to speak.

No other Old Testament prophet had the heavens opened to him. What a burden prophecy and intimacy with God carries. Perhaps it was by inspiration that his parents named him, "God strengthens." That's what a potter would do with his two hands to a lump of clay – give it a form with strength to do a task. Another meaning of the name is "God will toughen." Since the "hand of the Lord was on him," perhaps the image is of the two hands of God--one above him with the burden of prophecy; and one below, the everlasting arms to sustain him.

Like the apostle Peter in Acts chapter 10 who had a message unmistakably impressed on his mind through repeated images and direct command, and like Cornelius who "distinctly saw an angel from God," Ezekiel received a distinct message. Though the NIV does not reflect this, both the KJV and NAS say that the word came "expressly" to him.

Along with this explicit speaking of God to him comes a concurrent sense of commission: Ezekiel never doubted Who sent him nor why. He is warned that fear (and by implication, other features of naturality) can not be part of his mindset. As a symbol,

he gave up naturality. He was not allowed to insert it into messages, and he could not act on it personally. He was also warned that, no matter how stringent the course he'd run, he did not have the option of even occasional rebellion, for that would make him like the people he was warning, and thus useless.

Part of his "equipping" for such a role were inward sustenance (he was told to eat the Word) and outward durability (his forehead would be like flint) but this would only be in contrast to the hard hearts of the people he would preach to.

When he felt human emotions, such as the "heat of his spirit" and his bitterness after receiving the first vision, God's hand was on him steadily—both as guide and as restraint.

The Role of the Spirit

With all the kinetic activity and arresting images of the first three chapters of the book, it is easy to overlook the activity of the Holy Spirit. The first thing Ezekiel saw was a wind storm coming out of the north. Though such was an image of destruction, and enemies of Israel had come and would come from that direction, the Hebrew mind would have not escaped noticing that this was a particular kind of ruwach or wind--the same word used for Spirit later in the book. It implies the breathing of God, His action, His anger, His feelings.

It is encapsulated in this hurricane of activity that everything else happens. The Spirit is both agent and containment for all the things that happen there. It is the Spirit who carries the chariot and the throne and all the other elements to Ezekiel.

Ezekiel is passive in all this, the recipient of action--the heavens are opened to him, the hand of God rests on him, the panorama of the sapphire throne room is brought to him for his contemplation. In this heavenly drama, he is the first audience, the first eater of the words.

Not only does the Spirit transport the throne room of God to Ezekiel, the Spirit is the agency by which all the inner activity takes place. He directs the movement of the four living creatures--where He goes, they go. He thus directs even the mechanisms of movement: "the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels," but under His control. (reminiscent of how we should submit our spirits to the Father of our spirits and live-- Hebrews 12:9). In this concert of movement and sound, the Spirit is the conductor.

Just as the Spirit is active in bringing all these images to Ezekiel, we must conclude that it is He who will enable Ezekiel to "flesh out" and live out all the images with which he is commissioned to show the nation their sin. We can see in this the Spirit's great attention to detail and His proactivity in enabling obedience, even in difficult teachings.

After God begins to speak to Ezekiel from the sapphire throne and directs him to stand up for instruction, it is the Spirit who actually physically lifts Ezekiel. Just as He has transported the scene, He now enables Ezekiel to stand to hear the message. When the

message is complete and Ezekiel is told, "Go now," it is the Spirit who lifts him up (3:12) to protect him and get him out of the way of the living creatures as they rush by, and then the Spirit who picks him up and transports him back to the Kebar River, where he sits speechless and overwhelmed for a week until the word of the Lord comes again to him.

In this heavenly scene, there is a foreshadowing of a time when another Son of man will be sent by the Father and enabled by the Spirit to preach.

Symbol Making and Generalizations

The creation of Ezekiel as a symbol through individual images and generalizations derived thereof

Generalizations are listed in bulleted form. Those sections enclosed by brackets [..] are observations but not derivable as generalizations from the text under consideration.

The book of Ezekiel is one of the richest and most fertile of all biblical books. It is tempting to want to "mine" out many principles from it, but in this study we shall attempt to limit ourselves to the symbolic images God imposed on Ezekiel, and to generalize from them.

First symbol: The Word-Eater

Before the sapphire throne, Ezekiel is presented with a scroll of a book held before him in an outstretched hand. God displays it out before him, showing him the front and the reverse of all of it, written to a group of people (including Jews) He now calls "goyim," or Gentiles. Ezekiel sees that he must first ingest it before he can convey it to others. He also knows that he does not face a language barrier (these people speak the same dialect as him) but a much more difficult challenge posed by those who will understand, definitionally, the meaning of his words but both be ignorant of their significance while rejecting the words morally. The rebellion of the people is so great that they are both willfully ignorant and deliberately rebellious while having no excuse for not understanding what he would say.

What we can generalize about this symbol:

- When God calls someone to a task, He requires that they first internalize His Word, for only by His direct sustaining from the outside and the strength of the message inside can such a one endure the direct action of God on his life as well as the opposition of men.

[This internalizing of the Word can include memorization (hiding the Word in the heart) and seeing how a particular passage harmonizes with the rest of Scripture. However, the

most secure way of internalizing a passage is immersion (repeated reading and contemplation.)]

- Ingesting the word is initially sweetness to the submitted servant, but when it must be conveyed as a message of doom to others, it carries bitterness with it.
- Submission to a hard task may come in stages. For Ezekiel, he had to be told twice to eat the scroll, and even after putting it in his mouth he was told to fill his belly with it, not just his mouth.
- In Ezekiel’s case, God showed him that there would be three separate effects of his message. One would be that people would be able to understand his words. Secondly, his words would convict them that he was a prophet. And thirdly, they would reject those words. In such a case—where there is no language barrier, where the authority of the one who speaks is unmistakable and then the Word is rejected—the rejection is due to a rebellious heart and a refusal to understand. Rejection of the Word under such circumstances would have to be seen as the manifestation of a moral failure of the listener.
- We would have to consider the information source of such rebellious people. What would be informing them would not be the Lord, but their own naturalistic minds. It could not be that they have lost all ability to appraise, because they will conclude that the one bringing the message brings it from God. Thus we do not have a breakdown of the ability to think clearly, just the manifestation of an information source.
- Rejection of a prophetic message under these circumstances is tantamount to rejecting the Lord Himself.
- Under such circumstances, God’s man could expect to be hardened by the Lord—“toughened” to an extent correlative to the hardness of the hearts of his listeners. He must be immune to their threats, and immune to his own fears. He would also be tempted to himself rebel (be informed by his naturalistic mind) and would need reminders not to do that.

Second symbol: The Silent Man

When Ezekiel was conveyed by the Spirit back to the banks of the Kebar River, he was taken back to the site of his first vision. There he sat for seven days in complete silence. The other captives could see that something extraordinary had happened to him. Though different translations vary on whether it was Ezekiel who was “overwhelmed” (NIV) or it was the watching captives in whom his behavior “caused consternation,” (NASB), the fact remains that it was an emotion-charged seven days in which the bitterness of spirit that Ezekiel felt and his anger matched the emotions of the Lord who had determined to bring a disaster onto the people among whom Ezekiel sat.

- One who carries the message of the Lord is often called upon to enter into the same set of emotions that God Himself has when He sees a situation. Just as the angels who brought a glad message to the shepherds about the birth of the Savior were joyful, a painful message brings the bearer pain as well.
- Sometimes silence, not just preaching, must be learned and practiced. Because silence is such a remarkable quality—one which is noticed sometimes more than speech—it can be an effective means of communication about the severity of a situation.
- The last sound Ezekiel heard before he was literally spirited away from the sapphire throne room was the loud rumbling sound of the wheels and the whisper of angelic wings brushing against one another. Those were the devices powered by, and led by, the Spirit. He himself was to become a device for conveying the things of God, and the echo of those sounds in his ear must have brought him encouragement, for he would have known that just as the Spirit took leadership there, just as the Spirit exerted power in conveying him back to Babylon, so He would take leadership over this newest bearer of the things of God.
- Perhaps another reason that Ezekiel might have felt overwhelmed was that “the strong hand of the Lord was upon him.” As we will continue to see, such direct guidance by the Lord involves being silent when He wants silence to convey a message.

The third symbol: The Watchman

In this symbol, the personal responsibility of Ezekiel to the message is highlighted. He, not the people, is the sole focus. His neglect of the role of watchman will doom not only the people, but himself personally. Ezekiel could thus avoid his own condemnation and that of his listeners through the same act of prophesying faithfully what was given to him.

- Salvation of others—which would always be the primary purpose of prophecy on human behavior; and the glorification of God—which would always be the primary purpose of prophecy on the human mind—have a personal impact on one who is called to be a symbol. His disobedience to the faithful conveying of the message would cost him his life.
- God can and will put something called “a stumbling block” in the path of a righteous man who has turned to evil. On the one hand, such an impasse could cause a man of little will to change, to become stymied and locked into his path of wickedness. For a man who retained spiritual sensitivity, such a stumbling block would serve as a “chastening reminder” of the Lord’s direct involvement in his life, and cause him to re-evaluate and change. Someone who is called to be a symbol before the world, then, would be able to help a backslidden but essentially righteous person to see that the stumbling block in his or her life is there because of the care and attention of a Lord who wants the sinner to return and live.

The fourth symbol: The Restrained Personality

In chapter 3:24, the hand of the Lord is again upon Ezekiel, but this time it is under his own power that he is told to go to the plain. Ezekiel is once again able to see the immense glory of the Lord, just as he had seen by the Chebar River. Since there is little description of this event, it is easy to pass over; but perhaps Ezekiel needed another “dose” of the glory of God, a reaffirmation of His power and majesty, to fortify him before the institution of the next symbolic act.

In this symbolic act, Ezekiel is told to subjugate all his natural tendencies before the Lord as a symbol. Though he is filled with the same anger and bitterness that God Himself feels toward His faithless people, Ezekiel cannot act upon those feelings. His restraints are seen in three symbols: He will be confined to his home, he is going to be bound with ropes, and his tongue will stick to the roof of his mouth. All of these are restraints against his personal reaction to the people—“you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house.” Only when the Lord directs can he tell them what they are to know.

- The Lord wants intimate and personal control over the language of people who are to be symbols to others. Even though someone might share in the same emotions as the Lord—and might feel as fervently dedicated to their salvation and disgusted by their sins—such a person does not have the freedom to react to their sin. A symbol must inherently put the direction of the Lord above personal reactions (even when those reactions are the same as the Lord’s.) He must wait until the Lord authorizes speech.
- Someone called to be a watchman and any type of symbol must never confuse his consciousness with that of the Lord’s. In other words, just because you may feel about a situation the same way the Lord does, does not necessarily authorize action that isn’t directed by the Lord.
- The ropes, home confinement, and inability to speak were all protections for Ezekiel so that he could be assured that he would not act out of his own consciousness or naturality, but only under the direction of the Lord. Though they might be thought of as the direct action of others on him (“they will bind you with ropes”) Ezekiel was to see them as instruments of God. (In a similar way, Joseph of the Old Testament was able to say to his brothers who sold him into slavery, “You didn’t send me to Egypt, God did.”)
- We can see a progression, an ever-tightening restraint upon a symbol. First he is unable to leave his home—no personal latitude. Then his body is restrained—no autonomy. Then even his tongue is stilled—no ability to represent. But again, such must be seen as the protection and refining of the Lord, no matter what the agent by which they come.
- Then the Lord gives back the ability to represent, but only under his authority. When the symbol, the servant of the Lord, has undergone such a process, he will be purified in speech, because he will be better able to compare and distinguish his own consciousness and naturality from the messages from the Lord. Restraint, then, would give a person a basis for comparison. Thus a period of restraint—physical, verbal, or otherwise—would have to be viewed as a time of teaching and refining by the Lord.

- When speech is finally restored, the message must be conveyed faithfully without assessing of results by the message bearer. There is an air of inevitability in the Lord when He says, “whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.” Also inherent in the way God refers to Ezekiel’s listeners is his characterization of them as “a rebellious house.” Though hope for individuals is held out by the message, the corporate body is rebellious by nature.

EZEKIEL PART THREE

FIFTH SYMBOL: SUITE OF SYMBOLS CONCERNING THE FALL OF JERUSALEM (CHAPTERS 4 AND 5)

We could properly say that the next set of symbols serve as a suite, or interconnected and ordered arrangement of images that Ezekiel will personify with his bodily actions. Just as a musical suite has one theme but several movements, we will consider each of these separate actions as “movements” within the suite of the image of the coming destruction of the city of Jerusalem. It seems that during these “movements” literally only movement is allowed as Ezekiel is apparently still under the heavy hand of the Lord to keep his mouth incapable of speech.

- Thus the destruction of the city would not be by words, but by actions accompanied by the implacable silence of God. We can generalize that though God is patient to warn about coming destruction so as to urge repentance; once He moves toward destroying, His time for speaking will end as His actions become both His present speech (and the fulfillment of His past words.)
- Ezekiel never had the privilege, apparently, of serving in the priestly role of representing the people to God. Unlike Moses and Paul, both of whom expressed to God that they would die themselves for the sake of the rebellious Jews; Ezekiel was a noncommutative image of God to the people—not of the people represented before God. Perhaps we might generalize that certain people are chosen by God to represent Him and His will before the people, while the majority of Christians through intercessory prayer serve as a nation of priests, representing and serving as advocates of each other before God. This might be a distinguishing quality of one who is called to be a symbol—perhaps he or she would be more message-oriented and less of what we might call a “people person”?

First movement: The Agent of Siege

In this image, Ezekiel was to draw the outline of the city of Jerusalem upon a clay tablet, and then to construct both siege works, attacking camps, and battering rams against it. He was then to place an iron pan between himself and this model of the city, and to turn his face toward it.

This action was intended not to be done in private, but to be displayed to the people around him, to become a “sign to the house of Israel.” We do not read of the reaction of the people to this or to subsequent symbols—perhaps because their hearts are too hardened; perhaps they think Ezekiel odd or demented; or perhaps because they are hundreds of miles away from the scene he describes and do not believe it will affect them.

- The completeness of the besieging of the city suggests the completeness of the fully-ripened purposes of God when He decides upon destruction. The siege works would

have been towers to look over Jerusalem's walls so that no action there would have been undetected. The ramps would provide access up and over the walls when completed. The camps around it would cut off communication from possible sources of aid and of essential food and supplies. And finally, the battering rams would forcefully push the walls on which they depended for safety down upon them. We might generalize that just as God is careful in giving people multiple opportunities through many messengers to repent; so also He will be careful to strategize their destruction. This would be not only as recompense for individual rebellion, but also as a sign of the justice of God to others.

- The iron pan would signify the barrier between the people and their God. Just as Isaiah would say, "Your sins have separated you from you God," so when God enacts judgment does He take a different posture in which justice and judgment overwhelm the many ignored pleas to accept His mercy. One who is called to be a symbol must recognize the urgency of his task: to get people to understand the consequences of barriers between themselves and the God who stands ready to save them—but only up to a point.
- Ezekiel was not permitted to just passively symbolize. He was commanded to turn his face toward the scene of destruction he had constructed, and to pantomime out the actions. Surely it must have been painful to not be able to turn away from the scene. Perhaps this is one of the characteristics of one called to be a symbol: He is not allowed to escape the sight of destruction—perhaps so that he will be committed to salvation if possible.
- Ezekiel was asked to symbolize the agent of destruction. Just as when he was told that he must symbolize a watchman to warn the people, now he is put in the Lord's role of destroying them when they have not repented. We might generalize that when a symbol is asked to symbolize a role of destruction on behalf of the Lord, that while he would realize that he himself is not strictly agential he would nonetheless be participatory. Just as he could rejoice when someone would turn from their wickedness and be saved--he might say, "I helped save that person"--he would also have to realize that when someone was destroyed, he helped in their destruction. This implies an increase of burden, not only of responsibility, but of emotion, of the one called to be a symbol.

Second Movement: the Recumbent Sin Bearer

In this symbol, Ezekiel is told to lie immobile on one side for 390 days, looking toward the city to signify the implacable judgment on the house of Israel which in all its days of history had been rebellious and idolatrous. Then he was to lie on his right side for 40 days (a biblical symbol of the years of captivity of Judah—a shorter period because of their comparatively lesser idolatry than Israel.) In addition, he was to be tied up by the Lord in this immobility, and would stretch out his bared arm toward the city. During all this, he was to be bearing the sins of the two rebellious houses.

- Many times one who is to serve as a symbol may have to be confined in movement by the Lord—either by direct command or by physical restraints (Ezekiel experienced both.)

- Sometimes such a symbol may be asked to suffer the consequences of the sin of others and must know that he or she is doing so. In this Ezekiel is a type of Christ, who was confined for the sake of others and who bore our sins as did Ezekiel.
- We are to see in this the “great inconvenience” that sin causes God. It may sound trivial to say that lying on one side for over a year was inconvenient, but it didn’t ultimately harm Ezekiel. Our sin in the same way causes God to have to work around us sometimes—as Mordecai told Esther: you can help out with the salvation of the Jews or not, but salvation will come. No one thwarts the Lord’s ultimate purposes, but He wants us to know that our sin costs Him something.
- The outstretched arm of the Lord was used throughout Biblical writings to indicate the strong and mighty guidance of the Lord. Here, however, that same bared arm will be used against the nations who have rebelled against Him. We might generalize that a symbol must never equivocate about the fact that the arm of the Lord can save, or it can destroy. The ultimate result is determined by the way the people who hear the message respond, either by obedience, faith and repentance; or by rebellion and destruction.
- The imagery of restraint reappears in this symbol. Perhaps Ezekiel was reminded, as we must be, that when God hems us in, He has great purposes that go far beyond our personal convenience. Souls are at stake when a symbol is held up before their eyes.

Third Movement: the Diet of Siege

God does not require that Ezekiel remain recumbent 24 hours a day; but provides for him to eat but even that act is symbolic. God first told Ezekiel to make a mixture of grains and store them in a jar and to daily make a scanty meal for himself and to drink only a minimum of water--about three pints a day. Ezekiel was repulsed by the command to cook the cakes he would make over a fire of human excrement, and asked the Lord to not have him do that so that he would not be defiled. God relented and allowed him to cook over a fire of cow manure.

- In this image, unlike the symbol of the siege agent, Ezekiel is identified with the people, not God. Perhaps at times, then, a symbol must have a bicameral view: to be able to see the purposes of God, but identify so closely with people who are under judgment that he or she truly feels empathy with them in their plight.
- Though we do not know the exact mechanism (and perhaps it's best we don't), God can and does relent from not only announcements of judgment (see Jonah 3:10; Jeremiah 18:5-10), He also relents in other ways (see Genesis 18). However, a very similar request regarding unclean food was denied by God when advanced by Peter (Acts 10). What's the difference? Perhaps we might accurately say that some images or symbols are so powerful that they must remain intact (total acceptance of the Gentiles as clean before the Lord, for instance); whereas some other symbols may be softened just for the sensitivities and help of the one who must act out the symbol. At any rate, two things remain constant for the one who is called to be a symbol: the overarching purposes of God for the bringing of His people to Himself; and His mercy toward those who yield to Him.

- It is perhaps significant that God relents at the point where Ezekiel, by eating defiled food, will be identified not as the people besieged and confined within the city of Jerusalem, but when they will be scattered. If we look carefully at the image, Ezekiel must even after his protests identify with the people while they are in Jerusalem, but he is not required to identify with them as they will be scattered. Perhaps, this too has a lesson: he must focus his mind as his body is focused on the privation of the siege time.
- Just as God put Ezekiel on restricted and limited rations, sometimes He will hem in the physical circumstances of not only the one who is called to be a symbol, but will hem in the people under judgment so as to get their attention.
- Again we see the participatory, not agential role of the one called to be a symbol. None of these actions commanded by God came from Ezekiel's consciousness--in fact, part of it was even repulsive to him.
- In a cascading effect, the people who would suffer famine within the city of Jerusalem will look at *each other* in horror as they see the physically devastating effects of sin on the bodies of those who have participated in sin as they have. By embodying the symbol that Ezekiel was presently acting out, they, too would become symbols.
- Sin takes a toll on the body. Often the first place a hidden sin will show up is in the flesh--a venereal disease, a diseased liver, a pregnancy. Paul goes even further with this idea in 1 Corinthians 11:30. If we accept the Bible as a true representation of reality, Paul would say that illness and death can be traced not just to viruses and illnesses (which are participatory elements, not agential), but to the sin of not discerning the body of the Lord during His supper.

Fourth Movement: the Apportioner of Punishment

In this last specific symbol, Ezekiel is asked to participate by symbolizing the Lord in His deliberate meting out of punishments to the people. Apparently the command to shave all the hair off his head and face came before Ezekiel began his other symbols of besieging the city. Just as Ezekiel would “store up” the hairs until after the days of fasting and lying on his side, so the Lord would “store up” the punishments for the people: predetermined rations of burning, scattering, and slaughter.

Ezekiel is told to do his shaving with a sword, not a razor. This is reminiscent of what Isaiah predicted in 7:20 when he spoke of a hired razor from beyond the Euphrates, the king of Assyria, who would figuratively shave the manhood from the nation (see 2 Samuel 10:4, Isaiah 7:20.) But in this symbol, God makes it unmistakable that God will be the true agent of the action, impelling the king to act just as God impels Ezekiel. The unnaturalness of shaving with a sword reflects the non-natural way that God will unmistakably bring judgment to the people. Just as Jerusalem has been unmistakably favored and chosen by the Lord, their rejection of Him will bring unmistakable and unspeakable horrors in judgment. Most chilling of all is the pronouncement: “I Myself am against you, Jerusalem.”

It is significant that no avenue for repentance is offered in this image. Though his listeners would watch the strange actions of a man shaving with a sword, publicly measuring out the hairs on a scale, and then storing them for the day that he would lay a third on the clay tablet and burn them, strike a third with the sword he'd shaved them off with, and scatter the other third to the winds, God knew this would have no effect on their hearts. Even some of the few hairs tucked away in the fold of Ezekiel's garment would suffer from the raging fire—the proximity of judgment ; and those pitifully few faithful who would be kept from the force of the judgment would nonetheless be called, as was Ezekiel, as participatory agents in the wholesale destruction.

- When God calls someone to participatory judgment the focus is on the people under judgment, not the symbol portraying the action of the judgment. We do not read of this set of actions bringing anything we would think of as salutary to Ezekiel. Though his actions were divinely designed to bring attention and to cause comment, we might conclude that nothing about the enacted symbols was to bring anything to Ezekiel personally—no public affection nor acclaim, no hailing of himself as a prophet—except the personal satisfaction of obedience.
- Also when God calls someone to participatory judgment, the result of the action is a primary focus on God Himself as agent, and not on any participatory factor. Throughout the book of Ezekiel, the phrase, “and then they will know that I am God” is repeated 62 times. When God acts in such judgment, any vindication of the prophet who foretold the destruction is merely ancillary, not the point of the prophecy. Thus a person who is called to act as a symbol must not ever harbor hope of personal vindication from any source but God; and that perhaps only in heaven.
- A person called to be a symbol must be unflinching in the message that just as God can lavish favor on those who are obedient to Him, making their lives a showcase for the world; so will He also publicly withdraw His favor and even His pity and protection (5:11) from those who act out of their own willfulness in rejecting a message. The number of active verbs in the last part of chapter 5 are breathtaking: “I will inflict punishment,” “I will scatter,” “I will withdraw my favor,” “I will pursue with drawn sword,” “I will make you a ruin,” “I will shoot to destroy you,” “I will send famine and wild beasts against you,” “I will bring the sword against you.” When He relents, it will be only because the full cup of His wrath and anger has been emptied.

Ezekiel Part Four

Sixth Symbol: The Applause of Disaster

In chapter six the horrifying details of the coming trials for God's people are outlined, and Ezekiel is commanded in verse 11 to strike his hands together and stamp his feet and cry out, "Alas!" In this symbol, Ezekiel is commanded again to participate in the emotions of the Lord in revealing this coming holocaust. On the one hand, such a violent clapping together of the hands and crying out would show God's vehemence, not only for the coming time, but also for the present "detestable practices" of the house of Israel. In addition, his stamping of his feet brings to mind the command of Jesus to His disciples to shake dust off their feet as they walked away from unrepentant cities.

On the other hand, we read later in 25:3-6 of how the Ammonites were under judgment from God because of the way that they had clapped their hands and stamped their feet over the calamity of the Israelites. Same actions—different motivations.

- Again we see the symbol as participating with God in a coming action. Sometimes a person who is called to be a symbol must enter into the emotional response of God to a sinful situation. In this, however, such a one would understand that he or she is called to participate in a coming disaster emotionally while recognizing that his or her actions are not causal.
- A person called to be a symbol must continuously prescind, or separate, his or her own consciousness from that of the Lord in how he or she relates to people who are in sin. While it was right for Ezekiel to act out a certain sequence of actions before the people, it was wrong for the Ammonites to do exactly the same thing when they saw the destruction of the Israelites. That is because they acted out of their own "malicious glee" and not out of the motivations of portraying ahead of time the effects of sin. The Ammonites did what they did out of their own consciousness, only to exalt themselves above people they felt superior to. Ezekiel, on the other hand, would have been sorrowful and would have held out hope that the watching Israelites would see what their sins would bring about, and repent.
- A symbol must keep tight hold on his words and actions and must move in overt ways only when commanded by the Lord. The Ammonites would have wanted the focus on themselves and their prowess; Ezekiel's acting out of the Lord's emotions would have been with one purpose only: "Then they will know that I am the Lord" (verse 14).

Seventh Symbol: The Chain Forger

In chapter seven, God shows what is about to happen: He is going to remove His glory, His presence from the temple in which the people had put so much confidence and pride.

Because they had treated that building as some sort of magic charm to protect themselves from invasion and catastrophe, He will show them the effects of such things.

In this symbol, Ezekiel is to participate with both the people and with God. God will restrict the freedom of the people, but as Ezekiel prepares the chain, he will know that it is the people who, by their wickedness (specifically, their bloodshed and violence), are forging link by link the instrument of their own captivity. These chains will not only be physical, though they will involve physical “calamity upon calamity.” They will also involve the unseen—“rumor upon rumor”—and nameless fears. The particular profile of those chains are outlined in vivid terms, from which we can generalize.

- Link one: Lack of emotional peace. Though people under judgment would want peace above all else, it will be denied them. They will see that they are defeated by wicked nations and their source of pride is destroyed. Every place that would be a refuge or safe harbor is desecrated so that it cannot bring them comfort.
- Link two: No spiritual guidance. Many of us teach that God can communicate with His people through many means: direct revelation, insight from Scriptural passages, counsel from godly friends. But these three avenues are cut off: no vision from the prophets, no teaching of the law by the priest, and no counsel of the elders (v. 26.)
- Link three: No governmental help. Christians today often seek recourse through legal means –lawsuits, involvement of the ACLU or other godless advocates, legal reform in order to redress wrongs. Ezekiel shows the people that their violence and bloodshed have forged a link in their captivity in which their political leaders will be powerless and driven to despair.
- Link four: The recompense of one’s own standards. Because the people who operated by the sword and force believed in force, force will be exerted on them: “I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them” (verse 27.)
- Link five: the most inescapable of conclusions will lock the chains about them. “Then they will know that I am the Lord.”
- As for the symbol, by his participating in preparing the chain as a symbol and by holding it out to the people, he is allowed to participate in yet another aspect of God: He wants people to repent so badly and to accept the only true salvation from situations that exists (acknowledgment that He is God and submission to Him) that He will go to any length to warn and chastise people for their own good and to bring glory to the only One who can help them.

Eighth Symbol: The Voyeur of Idolatry

In this symbol it's tempting to look at the events and implications of the prophecy and not focus on Ezekiel as a symbol, which is the point of this study; thus to keep on track we will try to confine ourselves to those things in which Ezekiel participated and avoid the lure of other concepts which will take focus off him as a symbol. In chapters 8 through 10, Ezekiel is called upon to be a witness of coming things. His only participation is that

of sharing in God's horrified view of what had happened to His people, to expose those deeds, and to ask questions.

- Someone called as a symbol against great sinfulness must need reinforcement. In chapter 8 we see the vision of God that Ezekiel had seen twice before portrayed once again. We see it again in chapter 10--Of note is the fact that where previously the symbol of a rainbow (forgiveness and relenting of destruction) was mentioned, at this point it is absent.
- A symbol may be called upon to see what may not be obvious to others. In the case of Ezekiel, he was taken in a vision to Jerusalem and saw things that the elders there in his house did not see. A non-natural vision of things may be put into the mind of a person called to be a symbol.
- A symbol can be moved upon forcefully by God. In Ezekiel's case, he was snatched up by the hair of the head and carried.
- A symbol can be called upon, as was Ezekiel, to witness and share in an experience with God, so that the symbol can see things as God does. Repeatedly God asks Ezekiel to come and look at aspects of the wickedness of His people, as if to reinforce to Ezekiel's mind the necessity of the drastic means He will use to correct the situation. There seems to be a progression in the intensity he is to feel ("you will see things that are even more detestable.")
- He is to see the mechanism of how people by bringing their own images into places He has declared holy--off-limits to human representation or manipulation--such actions can actually drive God away from those places He intended to be meeting places between Himself and men.
- A symbol may be called upon to uncover sin. Ezekiel was commanded to dig into a wall to uncover the secret things done in darkness there.
- Great sin may cause God to react in anger, and God wants us to understand that no amount of crying and repentance can turn away His wrath in certain cases. In 9:8, for instance, Ezekiel is aghast at the destruction of men, women and children-- but God makes it clear that His judgment is commensurate with the weight of their sins.
- God was indignant at seeing something portrayed alongside Himself-- the idols in temple. He will not share His glory with any object He, or anyone else, has created.
- In 8:12 we see the core of what has made God so furious. Those who should have been leaders were "in the dark" in what the KJV says is "the chamber of his own imagery." To counteract the compelling nature of these mind-encompassing representations generated by each man's mind shows the need for the presentation of a more powerful image (Ezekiel and his messages) to counteract these images. While their sin was corporate, it arose out of each individual's suite of images: each man had his own chambers or innermost places. If the function of a symbol is to counteract this, he as a symbol must first see it, witness it, see how holding on to one's own representations is equated with idolatry.
- The word is maskiyith, a figure carved on a wall, an object; figuratively imagination, conceit, image, picture, wish. In this case, we can see how those images were directly tied to what they were doing: had reified their idolatry (given it form upon the walls) and had taken upon themselves priestly offices (were all burning incense as priest only were supposed to do). Significantly, the result of these actions was that they

concluded two things: God can't see what is going on here, and He wouldn't do anything if He did see because He's removed Himself from this realm. Thus they had created out of their own minds a different reality, given it physical form, and then concluded that God was absent from the picture and would be powerless even if He were present. No wonder He was so angry.

- A symbol as witness must himself know the difference between the holy and the profane. God's servants being able to distinguish between the holy and the profane: Leviticus 10:10-11-- priests told to not drink strong drink so that they'd themselves show in their bodies a "distinction between the holy and the profane, the unclean and the clean," and this being done, says God, "so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses." A symbol is called upon to witness in the Bible (through reading it) the criteria for the holy and the profane; and by doing so to be able to teach others that distinction so that people won't see their own internal validation of their own symbols. This is stated most strongly in Ezekiel 22:26: "they do not distinguish between the holy and the common." Chapters 38-48, especially with the portrayal of the new temple, emphasizes the distinctiveness of God as holy and what He proclaims as holy.
- A symbol's understanding of a situation may be completely uncorroborated by the people he is speaking to. When the Lord cried out with a loud voice, the victims did not hear, just the executioners and Ezekiel as witness.
- He was to witness the fact that judgment began with the ancients-- those with the greatest experience and thus the most culpable of sinning against God. That would serve as a warning to him as well, we would conclude, since he himself has such great knowledge.
- Ezekiel witnesses that the conflagration against sin does not come from his own words or his mouth or actions, but is kindled by coals from within the restless, autonomous motion of the will of God that fuels the chariot that carries His throne: His own authority. Thus Ezekiel as a symbol is not called upon in this utter destruction to participate, only to watch.
- Ezekiel must know the meaning of being given a new heart-- it is not only a sign of surrender but also a mark of God's new action on a person, and that will bring Ezekiel hope as he preaches this message of destruction. Ezekiel is called to witness the destruction that will come as a result of hearts that insist on their own images alongside God. The vile images must be purged before a undivided heart can be created and non-naturally inserted into a person.

A side note to this section: one of the most touching portrayals of the sorrow of God is portrayed in these chapters. In chapter 10, we see the sapphire throne of chapter one again, suspended over the heads of the cherubim. The cherubim are over at the south side of the temple, removed as far as possible from the horrendous acts that the people are performing on the north side of the temple. God Himself is not between the wings

suspended over the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, nor even within the temple at all. Instead, we see His glory move from above the cherubim to the threshold of the temple, where He fills the edifice with the cloud of His anger, and the court with the radiance of His glory. Meanwhile, the wings of the cherubim hum anxiously, as if warming the motor of His chariot for His departure.

There, on the threshold, not entering the His own house, the glory of God pauses wistfully, looking into the place He'd chosen as his own residence on earth but which had been so defiled that He would not longer dwell there among its new residents: the idols and their worshipers. Even when His presence leaves the temple, it pauses again at the east gate, looking back perhaps again in sorrow; and then it moves a little further away, coming to rest upon the mountain east of the city. The last thing Ezekiel sees in this vision, before he is brought back from his vision to Babylonia, is the glory of the Lord lingering for a moment, looking upon the city that has cast Him out.

Ninth Symbol: The Luggage of Exile

In this symbol in chapter 12, we see that the people are completely blinded to their own present condition, so Ezekiel is compelled to arouse their curiosity with peculiar acts which, more than words, get their attention. His hearers' problem is not a visual or auditory one, it is a disease of the heart which prevents their being able to understand in any other way. As verse 8 shows, the strategy of God is successful in provoking questions. However, whether or not they understand even after the explanation is still a question, for God interjects, "Perhaps they will understand..."

The action that Ezekiel is to take is one that is not only an attention getter but the acting out of a future situation as well. He was told to bring his belongings out in the daylight, packed as if for exile. While we do not know what comprised those belongings, we would assume that they would be his most prized and portable possessions as well as provisions for a trip. Inherent in the packing would be decision-making about that which is expendable and that which may never be seen again. In such a situation, that which would promote physical survival would probably be given highest priority above bulkier and more valuable objects. His belongings-- his priorities -- would lie outside for public perusal all throughout the day.

Then at dusk Ezekiel was to dig through a wall (presumably the adobe wall of his dwelling or a nearby inner wall, probably not a fortified stone wall surrounding his city) in sight of all his neighbors. It's not clear from the text whether Ezekiel was to move his belongings and then push them through the wall but at any rate he was to demonstrate a furtive escape in which even gates, windows and doors were not options, just desperate digging.

Once through, Ezekiel was to put his belongings on his shoulder (which tells us a little more about the limited amount of possessions he would be taking.) Then he was to cover his face, not to shield or disguise himself but rather to prevent himself from seeing the land. Two purposes are behind this action: first in shame for what is to come, and

secondly so that he will prefigure something as a visual foretelling of an event. When the people asked Ezekiel what he was doing, he was to tell them that he was acting out an oracle and himself was a sign to them.

He was prefiguring their coming captivity and more specifically the coming capture by God of Zedekiah ("I will spread my net for him" -- v. 13) though the apparent agent of the capture would be Nebuchadnezzar's men (see 2 Kings 25:7.) In addition, Zedekiah's eyes would be put out and he would be as unable to see as had Ezekiel in the prefigurement.

God further specifies the ways that He Himself will scatter, pursue, disperse, and destroy the unrepentant so that a few may be saved and finally acknowledge Him as Lord.

- A person called to be a symbol may be called to identify very closely with the coming destruction of unrepentant hearts. In the case of Ezekiel, acting out the desperation of furtive escape must have filled him with terror for the sake of his hearers who refused God's message for them repeatedly. However, the Lord's man or woman must actively remember the penalty for deliberate sin after having received knowledge of the truth, and the dreadfulness of falling into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:26-31.)
- When Ezekiel took his belongings out into the daylight and left them there all day for the perusal of his audience, he was making a statement, it would seem, about his priorities. One only takes into exile that which is necessary for survival or is of irreplaceable importance. What he would choose to take with him with no thought of return must have caused his audience to speculate upon--and contrast with-- what they would have thought was of importance. A person who is called upon to be a symbol must make his priorities plain to those who watch him or her.
- A person who is called to be a symbol remembers that a day will come in which God's power will bring to light the way that we have built our lives. Those who have built on the foundation of Christ with precious, enduring work will go through fire in the same way that those who've built on the foundation carelessly: a Day will come where wood, hay and straw will be seared away but gold, silver, and costly stones will stand the test of that Day (1 Corinthians 3:10-15.)
- A person who is called to be a symbol must not become comfortable or to make assumptions about the persistence of any state of being. No one is assured of being able to live another day, much less in the same condition as today's. What Ezekiel warned others about, he had to be willing to undergo as well. (And the way God treated him, there was no reason to suspect he would be spared exile himself!)

Tenth Symbol: The Quaking Eater

Also in chapter 12 is another symbol to demonstrate in the person of Ezekiel a further manifestation of the coming horrors. Ezekiel is commanded to tremble as he eats his food and shudder as he drinks his water. It is not clear whether Ezekiel will feign this trembling and shuddering or if his own distress will be manifest as he tries to go about

daily life. It is clear, however, that the symbol is a prefiguring of the mental distress that the coming violence would make a part of their lives in the near future (verses 17-20.)

Perhaps some insight can be gained from the subsequent verses (verses 21-28.). Perhaps Ezekiel's holy fear is contrasted with the two apparently prevalent attitudes toward his prophecies. First was the people's staunch belief that prophecies would not amount to anything in the real world. The second belief was that the prophecies were valid, but didn't apply to the present hearers but rather to the distant future.

- A person called to be a symbol must not expect that his or her feelings of urgency will be shared by the hearers of the message. Even those who believe a message may be valid may conclude that there's no hurry to obey it.
- A symbol must accept the hard-to-swallow fact that God may strike unrepentant people in very basic ways: in mental distress that makes daily necessities like eating and drinking a chore.
- Two mental attitudes are mentioned here. One is anxiety and the other is despair (v. 20.) Anxiety is the agitated state in which options are turned over and over in the mind without any comfort or apparent resolution. Despair, on the other hand, is a sinking into a morass where no options seem on the horizon. However, God intends these emotions not just to punish the unrepentant, but as a way of reforming their minds so that they will be able to see that their own sin has brought all this about (v. 20, see also 7:27.) Anxiety and despair, says God, will lead to acknowledging that He is Lord.

EZEKIEL PART FIVE

Eleventh Symbol: the Groaner of Grief

Several chapters of teaching, parables and warnings intercede before the next call to Ezekiel to humble himself and become a visual aid to his people in exile. In chapter 21, Ezekiel is called to an action that is commanded eight times of him, to "set his face against" something, in this case, against Jerusalem and specifically the sanctuary which God has abandoned. (The other examples of him setting his face occur in 13:17, 20:46, 25:2, 28:21, 29:2, 35:2, and 38:2.) Along with that, Ezekiel is to "drop his word" (also in Deuteronomy 32:2, Amos 7:16--translated in newer translations as "speak against." However, the image of a prophetic word falling precipitously from his lips is a powerful one that loses a little by being translated "speak against.")

Then Ezekiel is called to perform an action that is midway between pantomime and speech. He is commanded to groan, or sigh deeply, with his heart broken and filled with grief. The message he bears-- one so horrendous that that it will cause physical collapse and mental and emotional breakdown in its hearers -- will first affect Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's actions are intended by God to be noticed by people, and to be questioned. When his hearers understand the despair he feels, God hopes, they will understand and not want to be similarly affected. But in one thing, God is unflinchingly determined: these things will happen.

- A desire "to be broken by the things that break the heart of God" is a mark of the godly. Sometimes that grief must be displayed openly so that one's motivations for actions that others might regard as "extreme" may be necessary.
- Participation in the kind of groaning here is a participation in the heart of God. There are two manifestations of that kind of emotion, one from the Old Testament and one from the New that show us this. In Genesis 6:6 there is a word that is translated in the KJV as "repented" to show the great grief of God over the sin of His created beings. The root of this word is that of deep exhaling or sighing with great emotion, and newer translations use other words to express His profound grief at man's sin. A second example of this kind of profound emotion is found in Romans 8:27, where we learn that the Spirit, who helps us in our weakness and inability to live, participates in our suffering by groans that cannot be uttered. We might therefore generalize that just as Ezekiel groaned in empathy with the heart of God, so a person called to be a symbol may feel this kind of wordless and inexpressible grief. But a New Testament believer has an ally that others do not: a Holy Spirit who is called alongside him or her to groan along, and to carry our wordless requests to the Father.
- One motivation to carry through with the Gospel message to unbelievers and to sinning believers would be an internal assurance that God's messages of punishment for the wicked will not be turned away. While we may temporarily take our eyes off

a coming judgment, an entire angelic army and its spirit horses strain at the bridle waiting to be unleashed upon those who oppose their King. When God calls us to groan at coming judgment, it is to keep us focused enough that we do not look away or excuse idolatry.

Twelfth Symbol: The Strikers of Hands

The people of Judah were trusting in the scepter of Judah, but God has appointed a sword that "despises every such stick" (21:10). God reveals that this sword is a weapon of slaughter against His people, sharpened and polished for its task.

To show the people the dismay that will overtake them, Ezekiel is called to both beat his breast (verse 12) and then to strike his hands together (verse 14). The striking action is to foreshadow the action of this appointed sword, but also to participate in the actions of God who Himself will strike His hands together to signal the end of His wrath.

In this symbol we see the poignancy of the way that God is mentally involving Ezekiel in the coming catastrophe. In his body, in his mind and his emotions, God is calling him to participate in one of Deity's most disturbing attributes: that of the meting out of judgment against evil.

- We as Christians may blithely read 2 Peter 1:4 about the great and precious promises given by God and the privilege of sharing in His divine nature and miss the fact that God has made not only promises of blessings to believers, but also promises of destruction to those who oppose Him and persecute His beloved ones. He calls on us to actually share (koinoia-- the same word for sharing used of fellowship throughout the New Testament) in His own nature. Peter tells us that the basis for such sharing is the fact that we have escaped the world's corruption. If we are to share in His nature, sometimes it may be that one called to be a symbol may also be called to share not only in goodwill but also in another aspect of His nature, the aspect of justice against wickedness-- in such a way as Ezekiel did.
- God must surely have loved Ezekiel for his submission to such emotionally taxing requests. Certainly God treated him more harshly on earth than He did many of the wicked who lived rich lives and then died. We might generalize from this that emotional turmoil over the fate of the wicked is something that God often engenders and in fact requires from those who preach to hardened hearts. Such an emotional state might look to others like the antithesis of peace that Christ promised. Someone who is called to be a symbol must be able not only to defend his or her distress over sin, but even more importantly, must be willing to let God use him or her however He may wish to convict the wicked of sin. Just as we are called to be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope within us, we must be willing to give an answer for our urgency and distress over the condition of the wicked. We can do this with confidence, for God will surely one day make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

Thirteenth Symbol: The Road Marker

In chapter 21, Ezekiel is asked to illustrate how it is that even false prophecy and divination can be used by God to bring about His purposes. The king of Babylon's attempts to find out by consulting idols and fortunetelling devices are portrayed to show how he will come to a decision about whether to attack Jerusalem or the Ammonites first. It is not clear whether Ezekiel is to only pantomime the marking out of the roads or to also act out the decision-making process of the king of Babylon. But the same sword of the Lord would punish both the Ammonites and the inhabitants of fortified Jerusalem.

- In this symbol, Ezekiel is called to the appearance of aiding the destruction of Jerusalem. By marking out the two roads, he seems to be making it easier for the king of Babylon to achieve the goal of destruction of both countries. However, God makes it plain that His will is being achieved. There is a parallel thought in Philippians chapter one, where Paul counsels those who might be discouraged because Christ is being preached out of selfish ambition and insincerity. Doesn't matter, says Paul-- God is accomplishing His purposes, and that's all that counts.
- We might generalize that being a visible symbol used by God might require that we hold out some disturbing alternatives before the eyes of people. Showing the king of Babylon the way to destroy either the Ammonites or the people or Jerusalem or both hardly seems like a joyful gospel message. And it is not--because of the sin of the people. There is no "good" road of rescue or relief for the nations-- only the possibility of some sort of personal redemption of individuals who can repent and restore their relationship with God.

Fourteenth Symbol: The Tearless Widower

Perhaps no other symbol to which Ezekiel was called is as heart-wrenching as this one. Ezekiel is told of the coming death of his wife. We must assume that he loved her dearly, since she is the "delight of his eyes." We know that that his inclination would be to cry and to mourn for her, but he is forbidden to do so.

Ezekiel is to carry the message of his wife's imminent death to the people in the morning. Then suddenly, precipitously, that same evening she dies as with "one blow" from the hand of the Lord. Exodus 9:13 is another example of a swift and decisive action of destruction by the Lord to make His identity known to unbelievers.

Ezekiel's actions of not mourning and instead acting as one preparing to flee are unnatural and designed to cause questions from his viewers. He is told directly that such actions are part of his role as a symbol (he is also called a sign in 12:6 as we have previously seen.)

Apparently the very day that his wife dies, the city of Jerusalem was sacked and the temple burned. The horror his listeners would experience at such an inconceivable disaster would be shown in microcosm by his own personal loss. More than anyone else that day, Ezekiel suffered most acutely-- and most mutely.

- Though we must acknowledge the extreme suffering that Ezekiel underwent, we must be very careful to acknowledge as well the character of a God who is most economical with what He requires of us. God takes no pleasure in the suffering of the righteous, and is oath-bound to compensate them for whatever He requires of them (if not here on earth, then surely in heaven.) That may seem little comfort to someone who is called to be a sign before others.
- But the fact that we would subjugate our emotions --even those as "valid" as mourning for a beloved one-- is a powerful witness of His control over our lives, and our trust in Him. Paul asks the same of New Testament believers in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, who are told that they are not to mourn like the rest of men who have no hope. Instead, they must exemplify their confidence in a coming reality-- the day Jesus will return. We might say that Ezekiel's obedience in not mourning was exemplifying that God was more real to him than his own emotions.
- We as symbols are called to a stance of vigilance, even in the most difficult of personal circumstances and in what would seem to be the most hopeless of trials. We wipe tears from our eyes and keep our shoes on, for even as Winston Churchill labeled his priority papers, we must be ready for "Action This Day."

Fifteenth Symbol: The Watchman of Warning

Just as in the third symbol Ezekiel is told that he is to function as a sentinel to warn the people of coming attack, so Ezekiel is told again in chapter 33 of the importance of alerting the people to coming destruction and the way to avert it personally. Whereas a lookout is usually hired by the people he is to protect, this watchman is hired by the One who will besiege them if they do not shore up their defenses.

The only way of protection, says God, is relationship with God as exemplified by personal righteousness. Though all will be saved ultimately only by the favor and grace of God; nonetheless one's present posture of relationship with God is the indicator God will use in judgment. Personal responsibility is paramount, emphasized here perhaps because the people in Jerusalem had relied on their heritage from Abraham, their increase in numbers and their "squatters' rights" (all in verse 24) to try to prove they had the favor of God in spite of both personal and corporate sin.

It is significant that no one is allowed to fear because of past sins, nor to be over-confident because of past righteousness. At the time of the trumpet call, all assets will be frozen, so to speak.

One of the most telling passages about the attitude of Ezekiel's listeners is found in verses 30-32. It is revealed to Ezekiel that people are talking about him behind his back as a form of entertainment. They come to him with words of devotion but they're just looking for an advantage they can profit from--something like knowing a stock market crash in advance so that you can hedge your bets. They have no intention of actually repenting, just using information from him for personal advantage.

- We might generalize that though Ezekiel is called to carry the message, he and anyone called to be a symbol and a preacher is as personally responsible for his own spiritual condition as any of his listeners. He in fact has an additional weight of responsibility--not only for the discharge of the message, but also as a member of the audience of God who requires obedience from all.
- The vigilance that Ezekiel was called to reminds us that each of us must examine himself or herself to ascertain our spiritual condition daily. Although we don't drift across and back on the "line" of salvation and thus must not fall prey to fear of unknowingly losing our souls, nonetheless we must keep a finger on the pulse of our souls and take action so that when the hour of decision or judgment arrives, we are not found without the defense of obedience. Taken in concert with New Testament teaching, we would have to conclude that the righteousness that God would require would mean not only personal actions of righteousness but also the way in which we relate to and depend upon God.
- Someone who is called to be a symbol must face an unpleasant fact: just because you have a willing audience who comes regularly to hear you and expresses support and devotion to you, they may have ulterior motives. It is possible that they want only to have their "ears tickled" or to be stimulated intellectually as sought the people of Mars Hill. Even worse, they may be learning from you with the thought of using your teaching techniques, insights into Scripture, or Bible information solely to gain personal advantage over others. Paul in 2 Timothy said that there are people that believe that the appearance of godliness is a means of financial gain. Even more insidious are those who use their knowledge of Scripture to gain power over tender-hearted Christians who believe they should give credence to anyone who says that God has spoken about a situation dear to them.