

**What are Ezekiel's special emphases in his prophecy? Select three of these and explain how the modern church would benefit from taking these on board.**

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A number of Ezekiel's themes are common to other prophets, such as the call, warnings to Israel to return to God's way lest judgement come, oracles against other nations, and a promise of redemption for the faithful. But there remain some key emphases which distinguish Ezekiel sharply from other prophets. We can divide these into those relating to background, content and delivery, before turning to lessons for today's church from three of them. Of course, a full answer to the question would require a considerable analysis of other prophets to prove our points about special emphases – length constraints preclude this.

The key background of Ezekiel's prophecy is his priestly calling. This gives an emphasis on purity and holiness as against Jeremiah – and other prophets – whose worldview was formed by the Mosaic covenant and the concept of obedience (Birch et al (1999), p358). In this context, purity in his message is ensured in that Ezekiel is only bidden to speak the words God wishes him – literally for most of the book, as noted in Chapters 2 and 3 (we may see this repeated in the priest Zechariah in the New Testament). He is the Son of Man as contrasted with his divine master and source. Much of the book is written with a judicial point of view with God as judge of all. The Temple is the core of the message, in line with Ezekiel's priestly calling.

Accordingly, turning to content, at the centre of Ezekiel's book there is God in his awesome holiness, purity, power and sovereignty. At Ezekiel's call, an image of the likeness of the omnipotent God is seen on a throne surrounded by cherubim. A repeated image of God is of the wheel full of eyes, which also illustrate his omniscience and mobility. These aspects are all crucial to Ezekiel's message. God's purity implies that he cannot tolerate the sins of Israel, omnipotence means it was not his lack of power but his will that condemned Jerusalem, his mobility indicates his ability to leave Jerusalem (Chapter 11), as false prophets denied, and his omniscience show he can plan ahead the redemption of the Israelites. In his sovereignty, he resolves to be known and acknowledged by all – “then they will know that I am the Lord” is repeated 65 times.

As against God's purity there is man's sin, retailed in the list of evil practices in Chapters 6-7 which God in his purity cannot support. Ezekiel as a lookout for his people is bidden by God to warn them of the dangers they run as rebels who have

defiled temple, city and land (NIV (1995) p121). As an intended holy people who have God's decrees but behave worse than the surrounding people (5:7) they could anticipate judgement would be severe. Building on Hosea, Judah is seen as a faithless prostitute, with temple worship being totally perverted by Canaanite influences (Chapter 16). As discussed in Chapter 22, God tests Israel by his fire of purity and is disappointed at the outcome. God's inability to tolerate sin has a terrible outcome in judgement (Chapters 8 and 9); his inability to remain in his own corrupted temple (Chapter 11) and the fall of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel is highly transparent about the issue of responsibility. Hence, responsibility for sin is solely that of the sinner (Chapter 18), denying an interpretation of Moses' message in Exodus 20:5 that responsibility for sin passes down the generations, and the tradition since then that sin is tied to the nation and not solely to individuals. Ezekiel's message means God can forgive the next generation if they repent and he can redeem them from exile. Equally, while Ezekiel is responsible for preaching his warning, it is the Israelites' responsibility to listen and act on his words.

Accounts of the history of Israel and God's role are common in prophecy. But rather than solely emphasising God's glorious actions in favour of Israel, as did most other prophets, Ezekiel points in Chapter 20 to the repeated backsliding from the true faith (this foreshadows Stephen's speech in Acts). Ezekiel emphasises that God has been patient with the Israelites throughout their history. Despite their sin, God is nevertheless willing to act as a shepherd to his people (Chapter 34) replacing the wicked shepherds – the kings, priests and false prophets – that have led them astray. Rather than simply due to his mercy and willingness to forgive, God acts to redeem Israel out of concern for his name (36:22) and it involves cleansing their hearts and filling them with his spirit.

God is not seen as solely the God of Israel in Ezekiel. The oracles in Chapters 26-32 emphasise that God will mete out punishment to other nations and not only Israel in response to their evil. Babylon is excluded unlike the other prophets perhaps owing to Ezekiel's residence there. Meanwhile the most powerful kings are tools for his purposes, and the nations are all bidden to worship in renewed Jerusalem. Finally the presence of the Holy Spirit is more marked in Ezekiel than the other prophets, being

more reminiscent of Judges. Examples include the role of the Spirit in the call of Ezekiel, as well as animating the dry bones and as a promise to renew the hearts of Israel (36:26-28).

Besides its content, Ezekiel's delivery of his message is highly distinct among the prophets. In particular, he acts out a number of his messages physically in Chapters 4 and 5 when he indicates the fall of Jerusalem and captivity. Sometimes, rather than acting, it is personal circumstances that tell out his message, as when his wife dies but God tells him not to mourn, given the wider context of Jerusalem's loss (Chapter 24). A further aspect of Ezekiel's delivery is the very tough language to shock his hearers into listening – as in the image of God as the angry and jealous lover in Chapter 16. In this he contrasts with the false prophets (Chapter 13) who merely told the people of Jerusalem the messages they wanted to hear.

Ezekiel is also remarkable for the visions in his prophecy, including the valley of dry bones that come to life as God restores Israel (Chapter 37) – and not merely Judah unlike the other prophets, the spiritual battle with the forces of evil (Chapters 38-39), the New Jerusalem and the river flowing from the temple as God's spirit imbues the restored land and thereby renews all creation. Ezekiel's concrete image of future restoration in terms of a new temple is unique among the prophets. Parables are also a distinctive feature, such as Jerusalem as an unfaithful wife (Chapter 16) and the eagle and the vine (Chapter 17).

There are a number of these aspects that could helpfully be emphasised in the modern church. One is that we have lost the sense of God's purity and the dreadful nature of sin in his eyes. We are too willing to excuse sin and see God as a kindly and lax person and not a judge of all mankind. We need to repent and be pure as Ezekiel taught, with our churches being as pure as the new temple where God could take up residence. In this context, personal responsibility is a key complementary lesson. We cannot blame our parents or circumstances for our sins, for example. And Jesus' dreadful and unmerited punishment has also to be seen in the light of the blackness of sin in God's eyes. Pastors are responsible for delivering this true biblical message to their congregations.

Besides God's purity we may usefully consider that God is not to be confined, and is omniscient and omnipotent. We in the church do not have a right to his presence by assembling under the cross. It is our prayers, the purity of our lives and the sincerity of our repentance, which will ensure his presence. Only then will his presence flow from our churches like a river and revive the land. He is capable of resolving our difficulties and our nations' even as he did those of the exiles – a relevant issue at a time of conflict as at present. God is too often seen as a compliant person and not as a sovereign to whom we should be in awe - and await his initiatives and control over events rather than seeking to resolve things ourselves (even as the Israelites could not restore themselves by human effort).

Third, there are lessons for pastors from Ezekiel. Questions they might ask themselves are whether they are truly speaking the words that God has bidden them to speak, as he did. Or are they false prophets, twisting and diluting God's word to make it more palatable to their congregations? As shepherds of their people, are they more worthy than the failed shepherds of Israel? Like the ideal priests, do they rely on the Lord alone? (44:28). Besides merely speaking from the pulpit they could take on board Ezekiel's highly visual approach to his message, both in terms of acting and vivid images. In presenting the Gospels they could usefully point to the way Ezekiel's parables foreshadow the teaching of Jesus. A similar case can be made for apocalyptic visions and the link to Revelation, for example the mark of God for protection of believers in 9:6. They may also point to the many ways in which Ezekiel's vision prophesies the life of Jesus, from being the shepherd of his people (Ch 34, 37) to giving the Holy Spirit to the people (Ch 11).

To conclude, we have shown that the book of Ezekiel is a book of prophecy that is distinctive in its message and speaks to us today down the centuries. Christians who neglect it miss key aspects of God's character and message. I found studying it rather than reading a revelation in the depth of its riches.

Birch B C, Brueggemann W, Fretheim T E, Petersen D L (1999), "A theological introduction to the Old Testament", Abingdon, Nashville, Tenn  
NIV (1995), "New International Version Study Bible", Zondervan