



SEEKING SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Paul Wilson

AN OVERVIEW OF EZEKIEL AS AN EXAMPLE OF GOD RENEWING INDIVIDUALS AND THE NATION.

Each of us experiences occasions when we feel abandoned by God, during times of illness, grief, depression, discouragement or hardship. With the Psalmist, we say, 'How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land' (Psalm 137:4). At that moment, we feel that God is absent from our situation.

Ezekiel provides both a message of judgement and hope. Even in Babylon, a place where Ezekiel least expected to experience a revelation of God, God came to Ezekiel.

The book of Ezekiel gives us a pattern of God seeking us where we are, to bring us into a time of personal and corporate renewal.

REVELATION

Around his thirtieth birthday, when Ezekiel should have been entering the priesthood in Jerusalem, he was in exile by the Kebar river in Babylon. Here, he had a vision of the approaching throne of God (Ezekiel 1:2-28). Humbly Ezekiel commented, 'This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking' (Ezekiel 1:28). Having attempted to describe the indescribable, Ezekiel worships and is called by God, while in exile. What did this vision mean

for Ezekiel? Even though the nation of Judah is in exile, the gods of the nations have not 'beaten' Yahweh in a challenge. God was and is still on the throne.

That reveals a truth for us too. Whatever we are going through, God is still sovereign. Some commentators suggest that Ezekiel was by the Kebar river, at a place of prayer and worship. Sometimes, when we endure difficulties, through the discipline of worship, prayer, personal devotions, or fellowship together, we experience a fresh revelation of God. Ezekiel encourages us not to give up, even if God seems distant or absent.

REPENTANCE

Ezekiel, who was trained for the priesthood in Jerusalem, was called to be a prophet in Babylon. In Ezekiel 18, we see that the people in exile ignored Ezekiel's message of repentance. They believed that the exile was due to their parents' disobedience and there was nothing they could do to change the situation. In response, God declares that each person is responsible before God to be obedient to his will and each has an opportunity to repent.

Ezekiel presents God's argument through the example of a godly father, his violent son, and the godly son of the violent son. God measures each of these individuals against their obedience to God's laws in the areas of religious, sexual, and social purity (Ezekiel 18:5-17). This is a lesson in personal accountability before God; 'God has

no grandchildren' - each person is responsible before God on the question of obedience and holiness. The chapter balances God's judgement with God's mercy: 'Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? ...am I not pleased when they turn from their wicked ways and live?' (Ezekiel 18:23 and 18:32). God calls people to repentance to experience his mercy and forgiveness.

This chapter, calls each of us to examine whether God is sovereign over each area of our lives. The promise is that as we repent, 'None of the offences [we] have committed will be remembered against [us]' (Ezekiel 18:22).

REGENERATION

The gift of repentance is regeneration or recreation, 'Rid yourselves of all the offences you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit' (Ezekiel 18:31, 26: 26-27). As we see in Peter's sermon in Acts 2, repentance leads not only to forgiveness but the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). In Wesleyan theology, regeneration is the way that we are enabled and empowered to love God



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with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. Our hearts, are no longer hearts of stone, unmoved by the Word of God, but are sensitive to his leading and impressionable so that the character of Jesus, the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), is formed in us. Some say that Christians talk too much of sin. The reason is that the Holy Spirit sensitises us to the will of God, and we do not want to grieve him by rejecting his ways.

RESURRECTION

The vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37), comes after the exposition of regeneration in Ezekiel 36. In answer to the question, 'Can these dry bones live?', Ezekiel answers, 'Sovereign Lord, you alone know' (Ezekiel 37:3-4). Having seen the glory of God, Ezekiel realises that nothing is impossible with God. Ezekiel does not limit by his impotence, God's omnipotence. In obedience, Ezekiel proclaims the Word of God to dry bones, which come together. He then prophesies to the wind to breathe life into the bones.

Renewal still comes by God's sovereign plan of preaching the word of God and breathing his Holy Spirit into people. We may use different styles, but the adage remains the same, 'All word and no Spirit and we dry up. All Spirit and no word and we blow up. Both word and Spirit and we grow up.'

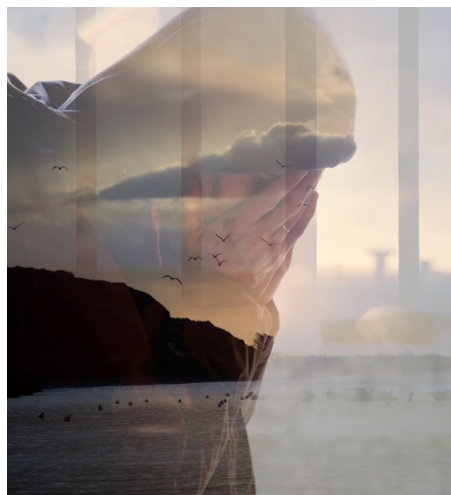
RENEWAL

Ezekiel has had visions of God's glory leaving the temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10) and returning to the temple (Ezekiel 43). In Ezekiel 47, we see the river flowing in increasing depth from the place of God's presence, the Holy of Holies,

bringing purity, abundant fruitfulness, and healing from the trauma of exile and healing of the land. Some commentators suggest that Jesus was preaching on this passage in John 7, when he says, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within them' (John 7:37-38). John includes the explanation, 'By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive' (John 7:39).

As we gain a new revelation of God, repent of our disobedience, receive a new heart and a new spirit, we move in the power of the Spirit to fruitful mission and ministry in the world. My experience is that by following this pattern, spiritual renewal is being experienced afresh today.

Paul Wilson is the Development Worker for MET. Paul is currently leading weekends on spiritual renewal around the connexion. He has also written on preaching for renewal in Expository Preaching in the Wesleyan Spirit (MET, 2016, £6.00).



Note from the Editor: Marine de Villepin is a French photographer, recently settled in Plymouth with her family. She is a Christian and finds much inspiration for her work in her faith. For more information or to purchase her work: www.esprit-photographie.com

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever felt that God is absent in a difficult situation? Share those feelings and how God opened your eyes to his presence.
2. 'He breaks the power of cancelled sin' (Charles Wesley). How has God's nature to forgive and forget, when you repent, set you free to a renewed walk with him?
3. God promises to give us a new heart and put his spirit within us. How has this regeneration changed your life?
4. Are the word and the Spirit balanced in your life and your church? How can you correct any imbalance?
5. Do we see purity, new life, healing and wholeness as marks of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the mission and ministry of the church?