

Ezekiel's Signs

Ezekiel 4

Ezekiel 4:1-7: *"You also, son of man, take a clay tablet and lay it before you, and portray on it a city, Jerusalem. ² Lay siege against it, build a siege wall against it, and heap up a mound against it; set camps against it also, and place battering rams against it all around. ³ Moreover take for yourself an iron plate, and set it as an iron wall between you and the city. Set your face against it, and it shall be besieged, and you shall lay siege against it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel.*

⁴ Lie also on your left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it. According to the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their iniquity. ⁵ For I have laid on you the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days; so you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Israel. ⁶ And when you have completed them, lie again on your right side; then you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days. I have laid on you a day for each year.

⁷ Therefore you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem; your arm shall be uncovered, and you shall prophesy against it. ⁸ And surely I will restrain you so that you cannot turn from one side to another till you have ended the days of your siege."

Background Notes

In chapter 3, God placed restrictions on Ezekiel's preaching ministry. He was to go out and preach only when the Lord told him to go, because Israel was a rebellious nation.

In chapter 4 God directed Ezekiel to give the people some object lessons that would symbolically portray the coming siege and fall of Jerusalem. Remember, Ezekiel was prophesying from Babylon. He and other fellow Jews (including Daniel) were already captives in Babylon, but Jerusalem had still not fallen to the Babylonians. The Temple was still standing, but it was only a matter of time before Jerusalem would be conquered. At that time, many Jews would be killed or brought as captives to Babylon.

During the few years that remained before the judgment came, Ezekiel gave these signs to the people as part of his ministry. He probably performed them in front of the house where he lived among the captives in Babylon.

Ezekiel was not the only prophet whom God directed to use drama in his ministry. At the same time, Jeremiah was using dramatic illustrations in Jerusalem to warn the people there of the coming invasion and fall of the city. Years before, the Lord had occasionally directed the prophet Isaiah to use drama to drive home his message. See Isaiah 20, for example.

There Isaiah was told by the Lord to take out his outer clothes and go barefoot as a dramatic sign of the way the captives would be taken away by the king of Assyria.

Drama and object lessons can be used quite effectively in ministry today - and not just for children. Sometimes folks can understand and get the point of your message better and faster when a dramatic presentation accompanies your sermon. However, all drama with no preaching doesn't get the main point across, so balance is needed! Ezekiel used drama, but it was backed up by his preaching - when the Lord "opened his mouth."

Doctrinal Points

1. Ezekiel predicted the siege of Jerusalem.

In the object lesson, Ezekiel was to take a clay tablet or brick and draw a diagram of the city of Jerusalem on it. Then he was to place the tablet on the ground and build miniature siege walls and ramps and battering rams around it. I wonder if Ezekiel enjoyed playing toy soldiers as a boy? That is essentially what he was doing with the battering rams and miniature military camps.

This object lesson indicated that before long the Babylonian army would surround Jerusalem and lay siege to it - and no one would escape. The point of the iron plate (v3) that was set up between Ezekiel and the model city was to indicate that God had cut off Jerusalem from His help and He would not listen to their cries for help. It was too late!

The second object lesson is in verses 4-8. Ezekiel was told to lie on his side beside the model city day after day. He was to lie on his left side for 390 days for the house of Israel, and for additional 40 days he was to lie on his right side for the house of Judah. Most likely, Ezekiel did not lie on his side continuously for all these days, but for part of each day. During this time he was restrained in some way, and he probably had something on his side (maybe writing) to represent the sins of the people that he was bearing: "*So you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Israel*" (v5).

What did the numbers mean – 390 days for the northern kingdom of Israel, and 40 additional days for the southern kingdom of Judah? Verses 5-6 reveal that each day represented a year, but did the years represent past years in which Israel and Judah had sinned, or future years in which Israel and Judah would be punished for their sins - or a combination of past and future years? And what dates determined the starting points or termination points of the years?

Commentaries offer many suggestions, and all of them are possibilities, but there's not a lot of agreement. There's even a manuscript variation in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) that has 190 days instead of 390 days. So this is one of those unexplained areas in the Bible. We'll have to wait until we get to Heaven to find out exactly what these numbers mean.

Verse 7 indicates that Ezekiel may have also opened his mouth and prophesied against Jerusalem while he was lying there by the model city. However, he may have bared his arm and prophesied in silent gestures as part of this dramatic object lesson. In any case, as Ezekiel conducted this elaborate object lesson, no one had any doubt about the main point: Jerusalem, the city of the temple, was about to be besieged and overthrown because of the sins of the nation. Ezekiel predicted the siege of Jerusalem.

2. Ezekiel predicted the famine in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 4:9-17: *“Also take for yourself wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt; put them into one vessel, and make bread of them for yourself. During the number of days that you lie on your side, three hundred and ninety days, you shall eat it. ¹⁰ And your food which you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from time to time you shall eat it. ¹¹ You shall also drink water by measure, one-sixth of a hin; from time to time you shall drink. ¹² And you shall eat it as barley cakes; and bake it using fuel of human waste in their sight.”*

¹³ *Then the Lord said, “So shall the children of Israel eat their defiled bread among the Gentiles, where I will drive them.”*

¹⁴ *So I said, “Ah, Lord God! Indeed I have never defiled myself from my youth till now; I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has abominable flesh ever come into my mouth.” ¹⁵ Then He said to me, “See, I am giving you cow dung instead of human waste, and you shall prepare your bread over it.”*

¹⁶ *Moreover He said to me, “Son of man, surely I will cut off the supply of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and shall drink water by measure and with dread, ¹⁷ that they may lack bread and water, and be dismayed with one another, and waste away because of their iniquity.”*

The third dramatic sign that Ezekiel gave to the people is found in verses 9-17. While Ezekiel was lying on his side, he was to eat only a small amount of bread that he had baked, and drink only a small amount of water each day. The obvious meaning of this symbolic act was that a time of great want and famine would come when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem.

The purpose of a siege was to starve the people of the besieged city until they would surrender. Sometimes a siege would go on for over a year (as happened to Jerusalem) and a time of great famine would be the result. The food, fuel and water supply would be exhausted, and many people would slowly starve to death.

The bread that Ezekiel baked was the bread of the poor. In hard times, poor people would sweep up whatever loose grains they could find – wheat, barley, beans, lentils, and spelt - and bake it over fire fueled by whatever they could find to burn, even including dung.

There's bread called Ezekiel's bread in stores today. It's marketed as "Bible bread" – and it's touted as very nutritious bread, as described in the Holy Scriptures. The quote from Ezekiel 4:9 is right on the wrapper! But the folks who market this bread missed the whole point of the passage. Ezekiel was told to eat this bread - not because it was nutritious, but because it was the kind of bread the starving people of Jerusalem would be forced to eat during the coming famine. It was the bread of the poor - or the bread of people who were desperately hungry.

This was part of the object lesson that Ezekiel acted out before the people - to indicate that Jerusalem would come under siege, and a great famine would be the result.

Practical Application

Don't expect only pleasant jobs in Christian service.

Some Christians think that if you're involved in Christian service every job will be pleasant - just because you're serving the Lord. But nothing could be further from the truth. Some jobs in Christian service are not very pleasant.

God asked Ezekiel to bake his bread over a fire using human waste for fuel: *"And you shall eat it as barley cakes; and bake it using fuel of human waste in their sight" (v12)*. This was certainly not a pleasant experience for Ezekiel, who was of priestly lineage and no doubt observed the Jewish ceremonial laws for purity. But it was part of the object lesson that Ezekiel was to give to the people. It meant that the captives would be forced to eat defiled food and become ceremonially unclean. The Lord allowed Ezekiel to change his fuel to cow's dung - but still it was a very unpleasant task.

Has God ever called you to do an unpleasant job in Christian service? When I was a teenager I served the Lord for a summer at a Christian camp. One of my jobs was to keep the septic lines unplugged from the camp bathrooms! *Not* a pleasant experience, I assure you - but it was all part of the serving the Lord and doing my part for the ongoing camp ministry.

There are many unpleasant jobs that need to be done in serving the Lord. Are you willing? Don't expect only pleasant jobs in Christian service.