

EZEKIEL, REVELATION, JAMES, COLOSSIANS

Bible Reading Schedule

10 Weeks

WEEK 1

The reading schedule format for reading through the Bible began in September 2022. We have one book in the Old Testament that remains for us besides about half of the Psalms. This will complete our reading schedule, giving helpful pastoral notes for the whole Bible.

Ezekiel will be our focus for the next ten weeks. This book contains strange visions, images, and messages that seem far removed from our modern-day lives. It is not an easy read, yet its message remains very relevant: God will purify his people and live among them forever. Even during the darkest days, God insists that he will restore his people. This message offers hope and inspiration not just to the exiled people in Babylon, but to all who put their trust in him.

DAY 1 – Ezekiel 1 & Revelation 13:11-18

Does Ezekiel's vision remind you of Revelation? It should. Ezekiel's prophecies are referenced in Revelation numerous times. You will discover that the presence and absence of God's glory is a central theme in Ezekiel. This opening vision depicts God's glory as powerful and majestic. Ezekiel is an exile in Babylon, but the Spirit moves in his life, and he is quick to respond. His prophecies are indeed interesting and surprising. I am looking forward to this journey with you. If you understand this as a heavenly vision of God's glory, it can indeed inspire you. The word "likeness" (V5) is repeated by Ezekiel many times because the vision is often pointing to something that gives you the impression of nature, whether earthly or heavenly. The conclusion in this chapter includes a rainbow pointing to the prospect of judgment with the hope for mercy. I will not always be able to interact with the various visionary images and complex interpretations that fill this book. But I will promise to give thoughts and ideas as they surface for me from the book. How do you respond to this first chapter emphasizing the glory of the Lord?

Oftentimes, the introduction of another beast has been labeled the "antichrist." The term "antichrist" appears only in John's letter. (1 & 2 John) John writes that he expected many antichrists to appear in history. In our reading today, the hostile character introduced opposes

Christ and gives us another beast who serves the dragon (Satan) and the first beast. The number of this antichrist, 666, might have stood for Nero, who demanded emperor worship and fiercely opposed the followers of Christ. Would he be resurrected again? Would this beast be like him in so many ways? The symbolic number represents supernatural evil. John might have used the transliteration “Caesar Neron” to arrive at the number 666. The anticipation of persecution and even death for believers is clearly referenced here. Without possessing the number, people would be doomed to starvation, imprisonment, and execution. John is revealing the intensity of the last days. The dragon and the beasts reveal themselves during the Tribulation; they will be ruthless, heartless, and full of fury.

DAY 2 – Ezekiel 2 & Revelation 14:1-5

Isn't it interesting that Ezekiel is addressed as “son of man?” Most prophets resist the invitation to be a prophet at first, but Ezekiel is onboard right away with the Lord and this challenging role to speak to rebellious people. Ezekiel was born in 623 BC and probably raised in Jerusalem. In chapter 24, we will learn that he is married. He went into exile in Babylon with King Jehoiachin in 597 BC. All we know about Ezekiel is what we will read for the next 9 weeks. There's no doubt that Ezekiel's message will be rejected, at least at first (V6). This short chapter is important as we know for certain that God called Ezekiel and he obeyed. “You must give them my messages whether they listen or not. But they won't listen, for they are completely rebellious.” (V7) What stands out to you from this chapter announcing Ezekiel's prophetic ministry as an exile in Babylon?

This is the second mention of the 144,000. Many conservative scholars suggest that the 144,000 represent Jews who will believe during the Tribulation. However, in verse 3, that number is connected to all the redeemed and thus might be thought of as symbolic of everyone who is a part of the elect who has now been received and sealed with the Lamb's name written on their foreheads. Beginning in verse 3, there's a hopeful vision of God's redeemed forming a great choir worshipping before the throne of God. These are actually very hopeful words about the assurance of victory and the eternal celebration for all of the redeemed. During this time, there will still be Christ followers on the earth, but this vision of heaven tells us that these redeemed from mankind are the “firstfruits” joining God and the Lamb in heaven. They represent the destiny of all believers. No matter how horrible these prophecies may seem, the conclusion is glorious for those who know Christ. How does that stir up hope in you?

DAY 3 – Ezekiel 3 & Revelation 14:6-13

Chapter 3 continues God's instructions and calling for Ezekiel. There are two specific points of instruction that get my attention. Before I share mine, what in this chapter caught your eye? PAUSE "Son of man, let all my words sink deep into your own heart first. Listen to them carefully for yourself. Then go..." (V10) The Word of God needed to first impact Ezekiel's heart and mind so that it might change him, and then he announces it with integrity, right? Isn't the same true for us? God's truth needs to stir our hearts and minds first! Secondly, the phrase, "The Spirit lifted me," is repeated in this chapter, but what Ezekiel really needed was the Spirit to get inside. "Then the Spirit came into me and set me on my feet. He spoke to me and said..." (V24) Ezekiel needed his own encounter with God before being commissioned as a prophet, and that is what verses 22 & 23 tell us, leading to God filling Ezekiel with his Spirit. You know that the Book of Acts shares the same theme of being filled with the Spirit and then boldly speaking the Word of God. That idea is repeated in Acts several times, and Ezekiel is an Old Testament example of that. These two statements about Ezekiel inspire me to follow in his footsteps. How does that strike you?

Our reading in Revelation highlights three angels delivering God's prophetic message. The first angel proclaims Good News for the people of the world as the Lord provides another last-chance opportunity to repent. Our God is amazingly patient and gracious! The second announces the fall of earthly power and corruption. God will judge their sinfulness and rebellion (V7). The third angel gives the strongest warning of God's wrath being poured out, reflecting a similar scene that Genesis 19 describes for Sodom and Gomorrah. The intensity of these days cannot be overemphasized, as the followers of Christ will be martyred as extensively as at any time in history. These prophecies seem to overlap, so it is difficult to give a precise order to all that is happening at that time. But an invitation to repent; an announcement of defeat for the enemy; the pending release of the wrath of God; many followers of Christ martyred; are all in play in these 8 verses. What might God's message be to you from our reading today?

DAY 4 – Ezekiel 4 & Revelation 14:14-20

What do you think of Ezekiel's dramatic presentation of the prophecies he was bringing to the rebellious people of God? This actually reveals some of Ezekiel's personality, in my opinion. We might think this is unusual, and the original audience would have also. But Ezekiel's dramatic visual aids could increase the impact of the message, right? The people would not just "hear" the message; they might actually "feel" the message. The situation seems direr and the method of prophecy might seem unusual, but Ezekiel was communicating to an especially hardened audience. Ezekiel would be difficult to ignore with such a dramatic presentation. It also took quite a sacrifice on his part. 430 days of demonstrating the prophetic message. The 430 days represent years of sinfulness for Israel and Judah, but it also coincides with 430 years of slavery

in Egypt. There's no doubt our reading of Ezekiel will have several twists and turns, but the topic is still the same: God's people have rebelled, and the Lord will punish his wayward children.

Do you remember the Battle Hymn of the Republic? The verse reads: "Mine eyes have seen the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword: His truth is matching on."

Obviously, these words originate with Revelation 14. We read about three angels again and the initiator of this judgment is "someone like the Son of Man." (V14) God's enemies stand no chance when the Son of Man comes in judgment. The carnage here is closely linked with the final battle in 19:17-21. God is just and fair in giving people exactly what they deserve.

DAY 5 – Ezekiel 5 & Revelation 15:1-4

This is another fascinating illustration of severe judgment; Ezekiel shaved his head and his beard. This is a gesture of dishonor, pointing to the destruction already predicted in chapter 4. But then Ezekiel would divide the shaved hair into three equal parts to show God's measured judgment in three different ways. Each judgment would be met with disobedience rather than repentance. This would include idols, defiling God's temple, and breaking the covenant that God had established with his people on Mt Sinai. By verse 10, I am ready to skip these horrid acts of evil, like sacrificing one's children. Unthinkable! The people have drifted so far into darkness and unbelief. Ezekiel has every reason to speak strongly and harshly to the people. Of course, they didn't like but God had already informed Ezekiel that they wouldn't listen. This was a hard chapter to read.

The overall reading of Revelation has surprised me, as so often John speaks of those in heaven worshiping the Lord Almighty. These 4 verses in chapter 15 do the same. The promise of heaven and experiencing God's amazing glory is woven into the intensity of John's prophecy about the conclusion of all things. The song is attributed to Moses, which is marvelous, but it doesn't match the song we have in Exodus 15. But Moses must be a songwriter even in heaven. This song is also connected to the Lamb, which links the Old Testament with the New Testament. Any time I read about all the nations, my attention is piqued. Israel is one nation, but God is the God of all nations. Heaven will be residency of all peoples as Rev 5:9 announces, "every tribe and language and people and nation." Revelation will be fulfilled one day, but not until all people have had a chance to hear the Good News. This fact has stirred my passion to do all that I can to make a global difference for the Gospel.

WEEK 2

I have not read ahead in Ezekiel as we anticipate reading the next five chapters. This does seem to highlight the warnings and punishment of God on his people. Idolatry, desecrating the temple, and continued disobedience will fill the pages of this week's readings.

The next readings from Revelation will focus on the intensity of the last days. There will be the pouring out of the seven bowls combined with the seven plagues, which will be attributed to God's wrath, even though the devilish nature of all that is happening points to Satan and the Antichrist. We will read about a familiar aspect of this season of the Great Tribulation with the title Armageddon in 16:16. May the Lord help us understand and apply His Word from these challenging Scriptures.

DAY 6 – Ezekiel 6 & Revelation 15:5-8

As we have learned through other prophets, the Lord distrains idols. The greatest tragedy found in this chapter is the multiple idols and pagan shrines that lined the country of Israel. Ezekiel begins in Jerusalem and circles around the mountains with idolatry everywhere. Ezekiel will mention this word for idols (round things that allude to dung, which is worthless and stinks) 39 times in his book. Even so, the Lord will not completely destroy his wayward people but will allow some to escape. These will "recognize how hurt I am by their unfaithful hearts and lustful eyes that long for idols." This posture of repentance will save a remnant for the Lord's purposes. Otherwise, the punishment of the Lord is very extensive, as we read in the last few verses of this chapter.

This paragraph is short with an announcement about the soon-pouring out of God's wrath. Sometimes we perceive angels as soft and supportive of God's people. But in this case, the angels are agents of judgment. Things are mounting with the approach of the Day of the Lord. We read of this in Revelation 6:12-13, with the 6th Seal, as well as from Jesus in Matthew 24:29. It seems to me that John brings a message that is circular, with each revolution intensifying the prediction. Throughout the Bible, we learn of the Day of the Lord as the coming of his wrath on an unbelieving world that has rebelled against him time and again. The Day of the Lord has a finality to God's judgment, which is to unfold with John's remaining prophecy.

DAY 7 – Ezekiel 7 & Revelation 16:1-11

The prophet's warning has been finalized, and God's judgment is sure to be poured out on his rebellious people. "No hope remains..." means that God will not change his mind. The end

result will be the certainty of God's authority and holiness. The day of judgment has arrived, and the destruction is on its way. It does no good to trust in wealth or material possessions. They will be powerless to ward off the impending judgment. God would destroy the pagan centers in the land and even the Temple in Jerusalem. In the past, God had defended Jerusalem (2 Kings 18 & 19), but now he would abandon her to her well-deserved fate.

Our second reading for today matches Ezekiel's judgments with the message of "no hope." Those who possess the mark of the beast would receive the punishment they deserve. Many would die, and the retribution would be severe. As I have said before, the release of the wrath of God in those days would coincide with the Day of the Lord. I believe the judgment will be swift and final. The release of God's wrath is declared just and holy by the angel with authority in verse 5. No matter how devastating and difficult the fourth and fifth bowls might be, the people refused to repent and turn to God. The measure of their hard hearts and rebellion is beyond comprehension. The end is near as the beast is plunged into darkness. Tomorrow's reading points to Armageddon, which is both a location and symbolic of the final conflict between God and the forces of evil.

DAY 8 – Ezekiel 8 & Revelation 16:12-21

It is hard to imagine such widespread idolatry among a people identified with the Living God and the significance of the Temple. The people completely defiled God's house beyond anything I have ever read about from Old Testament believers in Yahweh. They obviously did not have a high regard for the holiness of the Lord, as they dishonored his commands and compiled one abomination after another. In this short chapter, we read about so many different "gods" that are more than shocking to me. From a large idol at the north gate of the Temple, to the private practice of worshiping shapes of crawling animals and detestable creatures. The leadership was right in the middle of this idolatry. The women worshiped the god of the underworld, and others worshiped the sun, which was something only pagan people did. I don't see how it could get any worse.

It is difficult to define these "bowls" and who they represent. The armies from the east could mean China because Babylon is a figurative place that means rebellion against God and pagan idolatry characterized by their religious understanding of many gods. Readiness for the Lord's return is a common theme in the Bible and used by Jesus in Matthew 24, for example. Verse 15 in our chapter are red letters telling the reader that they are the words of Jesus. The sentence "it is finished" gets my attention because those are the words that Jesus used on the cross. The remaining chapters will give us a description of the end from various angles with prophetic titles like the great prostitute and more about the beast. The enemies of God have assembled

themselves, but they are no match for the Almighty. The seventh angel will announce that the work of evil and even the beast himself are finished!

DAY 9 – Ezekiel 9 & Revelation 17:1-10

You know that this kind of punishment and elimination by the hand of God is not unprecedented. In the days of Noah, only a handful of people from Noah's family survived. The people of God in Egypt were to be marked, so to speak, with blood on their doorframes so that the angel of death would "passover." Listen to these gracious words from God that could represent the majority, but the majority were not sorry for their sins. "Walk through the streets of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of all who weep and sigh because of the detestable sins being committed in their city." (V4) Of course, Ezekiel was very heavy-hearted for his people as they would experience God's retribution. "I fell face down on the ground and cried out..." (V8) These prophetic words in Ezekiel match the devastation that John reveals in our New Testament reading from Revelation. Our God is amazingly patient, but there is a time when his patience runs out in both Ezekiel and Revelation.

I recall the beast coming back to life as we read in these verses. That is one reason why the beast is referred to as the Antichrist. The world of lost people will be amazed and give allegiance to this beast. Most believe that this will only be an apparent resurrection by the beast. As John the Baptist was thought of as the resurrection of Elijah, or a devilish king in Rome named Domitian was thought of as the resurrection of Nero because both were hellish and had no regard for human life. The bloodshed of witnesses for Jesus is too expansive to even fathom (V6). Because the evidence of God's people is minimal, it has been thought that Christians have been raptured (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Some scholars have identified the possible kingdoms that these kings ruled, but it is very difficult to be certain. The enormity of the nations involved surpasses any world war we have experienced so far.

DAY 10 – Ezekiel 10 & Revelation 17:11-18

I realize my notes are more concise, but the material is difficult to interpret and equally difficult to apply to our lives. I am acknowledging something that I am sure you have already felt. However, my connection with this chapter has me thinking about the church and the importance of honoring God as first, and as holy, and as the One we live for. Otherwise, the blessing of his presence is not guaranteed. The Lord left the Temple and would not tolerate their idolatry anymore. The exodus of God's presence made the people completely vulnerable to the impending assault of the Babylonians. From this point on, the city was doomed with the

amazing vision of flying wheels and mighty cherubim as the Lord seemingly leaves the Temple slowly but surely.

Isn't it foolish of these worldly powers who side with the beast to think they are a match for the Almighty, El Shaddai? As I have said more than once, it is difficult to know what or who these ten horns represent. Some scholars have suggested a ten-nation confederacy with allies to Rome, or the European Union, or a powerful alliance of countries leaning toward communism. But the specifics aren't as important as the outcome, which is inevitable defeat. The great prostitute had been used by Satan for his purposes, but now things will turn against her, whoever she represents, and the beast will strike her down. One interpretation is that Rome is the great prostitute with rampant immorality, who the devil uses for a time and then overthrows her, as nation after nation turns against Rome. The idea of "getting in bed" with the devil never turns out for the good of those who compromise. There's no question that the chaos and uncertainty of these days will end in victory for Christ and destruction and defeat for the arrogant foes of God who received the mark of the beast and defied the Almighty God.

WEEK 3

Ezekiel will confront idols and challenge the words of false prophets this week, which is not necessarily anything especially new. I appreciate you reading Ezekiel with me. There is a reason we have read Leviticus and Ezekiel last. Leviticus may not seem relevant, and the instruction rather rigid. But we made it through! Now, Ezekiel, at times, is hard to understand but has significant value nonetheless. Revelation continues also with judgment and triumph this week. We have two weeks left in our reading through Revelation.

DAY 11 – Ezekiel 11 & Revelation 18:1-8

Ezekiel is spiritually transported to Jerusalem. He confronts the prominent men who are telling people to build on the land that wasn't even theirs, as if everything is going to be just fine. But Ezekiel gives them the opposite message, and to demonstrate that the Lord is serious, a man named Pelatiah falls over dead. He must have been one of the prominent men in Jerusalem. The sudden death of this man actually startles Ezekiel, but God is quick to bring a hopeful word to the prophet. The words of verses 16 through 21 point to a time of spiritual renewal and rescue for the people. I recall familiar words from Ezekiel in chapter 36 that essentially share the same promise, which includes changing the people from the inside out. They would have a renewed desire to obey the Lord and follow his commands. Plus, they would remove the images and detestable idols from the land. Ezekiel's judgment is strong and persistent, so it is uplifting to me to see that God has hopeful plans for his people someday.

You might realize that the prophetic books of the Old Testament often have a dual fulfillment. God speaks through the godly prophets with warnings and predictions that might take place in the lifetime of the people hearing it, but it often points to events that won't happen for hundreds of years. John is revealing God's message and predicting that Babylon will fall, which is interesting because Babylon no longer existed. But most make a connection to Rome, the devilish city of the first century, and continued to be in power until the Goths and Visigoths conquered Rome in the 400's AD. Her wealth, pride, luxury, or military could not save her. This suggests that the empire of Satan in the last days will be similarly unable to withstand the judgment and power of God. The call from God is to have nothing to do with the evil city, even run from it, or you will be buried under the pile of her sins. (V5) You can be sure of God's justice, as he will bring a double portion of judgment on the wicked queen and those who follow her evil empire.

DAY 12 – Ezekiel 12 & Revelation 18:9-19

The previous chapter was directed to the people of Jerusalem, but the inhabitants of Judah were not the only ones who had stony hearts, reluctant to hear the prophet's message. The exiles in Babylon with Ezekiel would watch Ezekiel act out his prophecy from the Lord. They would ignore it again. However, the prophecy specifically addresses Zedekiah, the King. He would try to sneak away in the night and would be caught (2 Kings 25:1-7), and the Babylonians would execute his sons in front of him and then gouge out his eyes. Ezekiel is such a unique prophet as he reenacts these prophetic predictions like trembling while eating and drinking (V17) as a sign that reflected the terrible anxiety of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah as they saw their inevitable doom approaching. The people coined a phrase that stirred God's anger and quickened his judgment: "Time passes, and prophecies come to nothing." (V22) The Lord said in verse 28, "No more delay!"

Wealth and prosperity are often the goals for human leaders and man-made empires. We know that Rome became very wealthy on the plunder of fallen nations that were subjected to Roman rule. Verse 13 mentions human slaves, as historians have estimated that nearly 20% of the population were slaves in Rome before her defeat. The fall of Rome would dismantle the profits of many, as material goods would be swept aside in a single moment. This kind of wealth and dominance could easily be repeated in our present-day world, leading to God's judgment, upsetting the alliances made with Satan's evil empire. Obviously, the possibility of this referring to both Rome in the 5th century and the overthrow of the devilish like Babylonian domination in the last days fits the theme of Revelation and gives us a picture of the swift overthrow of the demonic foe that exists right before the Lord brings victory forever.

DAY 13 – Ezekiel 13 & Revelation 18:20-24

Obviously, this chapter is directed against the false prophets in Ezekiel's day. Ezekiel prophesied that in the coming judgment upon Jerusalem, false prophets would be cut off so that the people would no longer be confused about who the true prophets were (Verses 8-9). There would also be no more delay to God's judgment—the Lord was coming very soon to fulfill the words he had spoken (V13). Everyone would see which words God had really spoken and which words the false prophets had conjured out of their own imaginations. Ezekiel displays his boldness and assurance of God's message given to him, whether other so-called prophets agreed or not. There is a very vivid example of this in Jeremiah 28 concerning the prophet Hananiah. He prophesied that the people would return from Babylon in two years, but those words were not God's words. Jeremiah confronted him, and God took him out. False prophets and teachers are detestable to God. We live in a day with many false teachers and false doctrine, which will be confronted by God in his due time with severe punishment because the Lord is just.

I know this is a rather short reading, but I wanted to look at chapter 19 separately, which will be our focus tomorrow. The stark prophecy in verse 24 reflects extensive bloodshed and turmoil throughout the world at the close of time on earth. These are predictions of judgment, bringing justice to those who had suffered persecution from the evil forces represented by the great city. The dramatically thrown milestone boulder signifies that the power of Babylon (Rome) has been forever thrown down. The defeat seems final and never to be reconstructed again.

DAY 14 – Ezekiel 14 & Revelation 19:1-10

The leaders of Israel in Babylon are visiting Ezekiel for some encouragement, but their divided hearts and outlandish idolatry could not be affirmed. The power of Babylon must have been impressive to these leaders as they succumbed to the detestable worship of many gods. The Lord would judge these half-hearted leaders severely. Verse 11 reflects God's heart and purpose, that the severity of the punishment would lead to the restoration of allegiance to God. "They will be my people, and I will be their God." If any country dishonors the name of the Lord, he would enact the covenant curses of famine, wild animals, war, and disease as is declared in verses 12 to 20. In a way, Ezekiel is naming the hypothetical country as Jerusalem (V22) who would be victim to these curses, even though some would survive. As these survivors are ushered to Babylon, the Jewish people already there would realize why the Lord had brought such severe punishment on Jerusalem and Judah. The Sovereign Lord had acted justly, as he always does.

These words announcing the victory and triumphant praise of heaven are beautiful and cause us to long for that day. The wedding feast of the Lamb is hard to imagine. There are several artists who have given it a try. I actually enjoy viewing these interesting and inspiring renditions of this anticipated feast. "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." (V9) That's us! You might notice that verses 1-4 give thanks to God that the enemy/enemies have been defeated. Then, John reveals the glorious rewards for the saints in verses 5 to 8, which causes exuberant praise. I can't help but think about Psalm 23:5, which reads, "You have prepared a table before me (in the presence of my enemies), you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows." No more enemies after the Lord's final victory, but only a feast beyond our imagination with abundance and fellowship forever. How do these promises touch your heart?

DAY 15 – Ezekiel 15 & Revelation 19:11-21

How's that for a short chapter? But you have to admit, short does not mean sweet. In a way, it reminds me of John 15 and the Vine and the branches. The part of John 15 that I am thinking of has to do with the fruitless branch that is pruned and even cut off, and also thrown into the fire.

The message from Ezekiel seems even more severe than the rebuke from Jesus. The similarity, to me, is being unfaithful to the Lord (V8). The statement in verse 7 of escaping one fire to later be consumed by another fire has an interpretation that is historical. Judah was partially defeated by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC, and completely dismantled in 586 BC by the same Babylonian King when Jerusalem was destroyed. Ezekiel uses a parable to relay this devastating message of judgment from God to the people of Judah.

These are the words we have anticipated in Revelation. The coming of the Lord in victory as the Rider on the White Horse. This really is the climactic scene as God's enemies are defeated and punished as they deserve. John had already revealed to the reader a vision of the Son of Man as majestic, full of God's power and glory in 1:12-16. The vision is filled in with his names as Faithful and True, Word of God, and King of kings/Lord of lords in our reading today. Verse 17 seems to point to the same feast we read about yesterday as the wedding feast of the Lamb. But other interpreters suggest they are two separate events, one celebrating grace and reward, and the other portraying judgment and punishment. I have previously thought of them as the same event, but I now perceive them as separate. The first is beautiful and full of rejoicing; the other has retribution and bloodshed. It tells us that the sword that our Lord Jesus wielded will bring the death sentence to the beast and all those who accept the mark of the beast. In verse 14, it refers to the armies of heaven as the bride of the Lamb from 19:8, so my understanding is we will join the King of kings in this final battle referred to as Armageddon (16:16). The Lord's army will also ride white horses as in says in v14b. How do you respond to these words of victory and finality?

WEEK 4

I anticipate the creativity and confrontation of Ezekiel being in rare form in chapters 16 through 20. He will prophesy with parables, analogies, and straightforward rebuke. Sometimes I have a previous understanding of what we will be reading, but these chapters in Ezekiel are foreign to me since I haven't read them in a very long time. So, I am eager to read and contemplate the message that God gave through Ezekiel this coming week.

Revelation 20 to 22 needs no introduction. These are the final, ultimate words of John and tell us about the close of everything on this earth. But as hard as chapter 20 might be, chapters 21 & 22 are glorious. I am not even sure if we will complete Revelation this week, even though I originally thought we would. Let's dive in and see how deep we go.

DAY 16 – Ezekiel 16 & Revelation 20:1-6

As harsh and graphic as Ezekiel is in this chapter, he is also very creative, likening Jerusalem to an abandoned baby. Meaning, the only reason Jerusalem survived was because of the kindness of the Lord. The Lord raised up a people for himself, but the people thought their fame and beauty were their own (V15). Verse 22 is crucial to Jerusalem's downfall. They forgot how they got there. "In all your years of adultery and detestable sins, you have not once remembered the days long ago when you lay naked in a field, kicking about in your own blood." Too often, we forget the goodness of God and take too much credit for our successes. This is often the first step downward, leading to sorrow and immoral promiscuity. God's punishment would be severe but not final. Jerusalem's sins were serious and had to be judged, but judgment was not God's last word on Jerusalem (Verses 59-63). The lasting covenant of God to his people superseded the devastation of their sins. Ezekiel tells us that God's forgiveness of her sins would finally bring Jerusalem to repentance.

As is true throughout Revelation, there's the activity of the devil, Satan (Verses 1-3), as well as the reign of God's holy people (Verses 4-6), side by side. One of my more surprising "take-aways" from Revelation is how often heaven is mentioned, and along with that, the assurance of God's people reigning with Christ forever. My recall focused on the dragon and the beast who will cause immense turmoil on the earth in the last days. But John tells us that during this whole time, the saints of God are rejoicing in heaven, assured of the victorious outcome. Satan will be incarcerated for 1000 years. Oh, how pleasant that sounds to me! The special status of the martyrs is well deserved and will definitely be recognized in heaven. Another affirmation pertains to those who courageously resisted the beast and his mark. The meaning of

the second death is portrayed in tomorrow's reading. But believers are freed from the second death, which is permanent and a place of judgment and separation from God forever.

DAY 17 – Ezekiel 17 & Revelation 20:7-15

Ezekiel employs his creativity again with a parable of prediction that utilizes both story and reality to make an impact. The interpretation of the parable gives two movements of judgment. Nebuchadnezzar would swoop down like a great eagle and snatch up Jehoiachin and others and carry them off to Babylon. Zedekiah would become the new king, but he would further displease Nebuchadnezzar and become another victim of the might of Babylon. I have mentioned the date of 597 BC, and the second date of destruction for Jerusalem is 586 BC. The first eagle obviously represents the first date, and the second is the final defeat of Judah, which will last seventy years according to Jeremiah's prophecy. Ezekiel will predict a day of restoration, but he will never live to see it. Ezekiel gives a short but real message of hope at the close of almost all his prophetic messages to God's people. This day of new life (V24) would be slow in the making, but we know through history that the people of God returned to Jerusalem with the opportunity to begin again.

The Great White Throne judgment sticks out in our reading for today. How are we to understand this final day of judgment? In reading these verses, I wondered about my understanding that the white throne is a judgment for unbelievers. The Book of Life has the names of the redeemed in it, but on the other hand, the books seem to be a record of deeds while on earth. The deeds of unbelievers condemn them because they are without Christ. But believers are also judged, according to the Bible, at the Judgement Seat of Christ (2 COR 5:10). This is understood as a judgment concerning rewards. As I said yesterday, the second death is final. Punishment and separation are the eternal outcome of those who rejected Christ. Justice will be served with sin and rebellion eliminated forever. The rest of Revelation should stir up worship and gratitude because John reveals the eternal assurance of those included in the Lamb's Book of Life.

DAY 18 – Ezekiel 18 & Revelation 21:1-8

This chapter plays an important role for us, but even more so for those who first heard it. The lines were blurred concerning family rebellion and passed-down sins. Essentially, Ezekiel is saying that if a person lives in obedience and follows the way of the Lord, what his parents did or didn't do is not the crucial issue. Verse 4, "The person who sins is the one who will die." He gives example after example of how individual accountability is God's way. Of course, we know that the Bible says sins are passed down to the third and fourth generation, but the meaning is that when parents sin, the tendency is for the children to follow. But it doesn't have to be that

way. Verse 19 declares, 'What?' you ask. 'Doesn't the child pay for the parent's sins?' No! For if the child does what is just and right and keeps my decrees, that child will surely live.' (V32) I think this chapter is especially important because we are reminded that we stand before God individually on our own faith and our own obedience.

How often have you heard these words about heaven? "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain." (V4) I love the reality of heaven being a place where everything is new. There are words and ideas I read in these verses that stir my heart. We are the bride of Christ, beautifully dressed in verse 2. We will begin eternal fellowship with God forever in verse 3. The words from the cross ring out, "It is finished!" (V6) He declares his identity, "I am the Alpha and the Omega." This title says to me, "Always was and ever will be!" Sin, unbelief, immorality, idols, etc., are burned up in the second death, which is permanent. They will never be present in heaven. How does the announcement of these verses stir your heart?

DAY 19 – Ezekiel 19 & Revelation 21:9 to 22:5

If you are like me, you probably aren't very sure about what and who the subjects of Ezekiel's prophecy are. Verse 14 tells us this is a funeral song, but the idea behind Ezekiel's words is that the characters referenced aren't dead yet. We have two lions and a fruitful vine, which are often images used for royalty in Israel, that is, kings and princes. The interpretation of the first prince most likely represented Jehoahaz, who only reigned for three months and was carried off to Egypt (2 Kings 23:33-34). Also, the second lion (V5f) could be Jehoiachin or Zedekiah; I have previously mentioned these two kings as both of them were carried off to Babylon in either 597 BC or 586 BC, respectively. Verse 10 about the vine must refer to all of Judah, as God's people were full of pride and disobedience, so that the Lord uprooted them in judgment for their wayward lives and neglect in following the Lord. There would not be a successor to Zedekiah as verse 14 says, "its remaining limbs are not strong enough to be a ruler's scepter."

I hope you enjoyed reading this section on the New Jerusalem as much as I did. What are some of your first impressions? The beauty of the eternal city is beyond our imagination, and the size is enormous as a suspended city 1400 X 1400 X 1400 miles each way forming a cube. Jewels and gates and supernatural light are just three aspects of the city that got my attention, not to mention the presence of Jesus with the Father and the Spirit. The Trinity will come to life for us, and we will know the Lord face to face and worship the majesty of our God forever and ever. The promise for all the nations is especially inspiring to me because it indicates that there will be believers from every people group (ethne, nations) in the world residing in heaven. That's

why every person (ethne) will first have an opportunity to hear about Jesus and make a decision based on faith about his identity and their need for a Savior. Matthew 24:14 reminds us that all will have the opportunity to hear the Good News, and then Jesus will come back. 22:1-5 are often referred to as the New Eden, which is refashioned and united with the celestial city as God's gift to those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life (21:27). These words are meant to breathe hope into your hearts as we anticipate the blessing of eternity with Jesus forever.

DAY 20 – Ezekiel 20 & Revelation 22:6-21

Ezekiel begins with a specific date, August 14, 591 BC. Five more years would pass before the destruction of Jerusalem. The chapter begins with the leaders coming to Ezekiel asking for a message from God. This same approach happened in chapter 14. The outcome will be similar to God's patience having run dry. The pattern of the people denying the Lord and dishonoring his name has been repeated time and again. The Lord burned with anger but would relent from completely destroying his people. Whether in Egypt or in the wilderness or after they are established in the Promised Land, the people offered worship to pagan gods. The Lord is always concerned about the promises he had made and the covenant that governed his relationship with the people. This would cause him to no longer be consumed with anger but bring restoration instead. The bottom line is about God honoring the credibility of his name. "You will know that I am the Lord, O people of Israel, when I have honored my name by treating you mercifully in spite of your wickedness. I, the Sovereign Lord, have spoken!" (V44)

Are you ready for our wrap up to the Book of Revelation? I hope you have some clarity on this complex book and that it helps you remember that God will bring justice to the earth one day. The final section has the title, "Jesus is Coming." These words are John's reaction to the angel's revelation, and his response is one of worship. I think of these closing words as a message of exhortation, which to me means, "please apply to your life." First, what you have read is meant to stir up worship in your heart. Second, hang in there, the time is near. The life of a disciple of Jesus is a call to perseverance. The wrap-up for this Book points to the credibility of the entire Bible. The Lord orchestrated the compilation of Genesis through Revelation. Honor these words and live by them. Maranatha is a beautiful prayer meaning "Come Lord Jesus!" (V20). The companionship of Christ is the closing statement, just like Matthew 28:20, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." May the grace and fellowship of the Lord Jesus be with us all.

WEEK 5

Our journey through Ezekiel is both fascinating and challenging. Ezekiel is commissioned by God to warn and confront God's people. By the end of this week, we will also read about God's confrontation with the pagan nations. God's main concern centers around the sin and idolatry of his own people, but the Lord does not overlook the arrogant oppressors that surround Judah. God shows that he is the Judge for all people, and the whole earth is accountable to him.

Previously, when we read James, we read one chapter a day for five days. But it seems appropriate and wise to slow down and contemplate the deep and challenging message from James for a few weeks.

DAY 21 – Ezekiel 21 & James 1:1-4

The unifying aspect of judgment in this chapter is God wielding a sword. It may be surprising to you that Ezekiel's prophecy lumps the righteous and the wicked together in verses 3 to 5. It seems to me that the righteous may have overlooked the sins of the wicked. A theme in the Old Testament suggests that God will spare the righteous and punish the wicked. But this is not true, most likely because the righteous accepted the sins of the wicked and took no stand to confront and warn the people. Babylon's King, Nebuchadnezzar, would have the sword in his possession and would choose to attack Jerusalem instead of Rabbah, the capital city of Ammon. But the Ammonites would not be exempt from God's punishment due to their mockery and debauchery (25:1-7). Judgment may begin with God's household (1 Peter 4:17), but it did not end there. God's judgment included the pagan nations around Judah.

Are you ready for this deep and dynamic letter from James? We are called to develop a mature and consistent faith that reflects the influence of God on our lives. The message of salvation that is received by grace through faith can be misunderstood when we separate it from character. Oftentimes, in the New Testament, the authors emphasize behavior. Why? The evidence of Christ's work in our lives is tied to the mission of representing the Lord in this world. We are called to reflect his glory, which looks like joy in the midst of trials and perseverance in the midst of disappointments. The writer of this letter is identified as the brother of Jesus. James would have placed his faith in Jesus even though he grew up with him in the same home. That is a fascinating idea and tells us that this letter is worth a slow and deep dive into the meaning. Verses 2 to 4 reflect the intensity of life for followers of Christ who are empowered by God to rejoice even in the midst of tough things. Why not spend a little extra time memorizing

this short paragraph? I guarantee that you will benefit from it and come back to it time and again.

DAY 22 – Ezekiel 22 & James 1:5-8

In 2015, I had the pleasure of visiting Jerusalem as a real high point in my life as a pastor. It is hard to read this chapter with corruption and bloodshed in the holy city. Ezekiel addresses their sins specifically, which doesn't make it any easier to read. Murder is unthinkable, but the family life of many was also a place of rebellion, and the way that orphans and widows were treated was completely wrong and unjust. Their religious life was a farce with idols and pagan worship. Sexual immorality was an everyday kind of sin. Verses 17-22 describe the judgment as a refiner's furnace, which would not bring purity but "worthless slag." The Lord would burn up the sins of these fallen people. So, we aren't surprised when Ezekiel identifies the leaders as the main culprits who led the people astray. Ezekiel also reveals that no one was worthy to stand in the gap (V30) to keep the city from being destroyed. It's a heavy chapter full of sadness and the severe consequences of more sins than can be counted.

These next four verses in James are familiar ones to me, with the emphasis on "wisdom." Who doesn't need more wisdom? The promise here is so practical because we often lack wisdom. James will teach us more about wisdom in 3:13-18. But for now, wisdom from above is received by unwavering faith. Before James closes this paragraph, he will confront anyone approaching God with a "double-mindedness." We might think of this term as walking on the fence and wavering in our trust in the Lord. These words seem so practical to me because they call for an undivided heart. Right from the get-go, James is challenging his readers to be "all in." What do you receive from this practical and challenging paragraph?

DAY 23 – Ezekiel 23 & James 1:9-12

This is a long and dreadful chapter about the spiritual prostitution of God's people. It is very graphic and likens the wayward, immoral lives of two sisters to the city of Samaria and Jerusalem, which is especially sad. The older sister represents the Northern Kingdom of Israel and her capital city of Samaria. Her depraved acts of lust and adultery lead to captivity for her children and death for herself. (V10) But the younger sister, who represents the Southern Kingdom, did not learn anything from the demise of the older sister. She gave herself away in prostitution and experienced the consequences of her sin just like her older sister. Again, this is an analogy of two capital cities continuing to disobey the Lord. Jerusalem gave way to the same detestable sins as Samaria and would have the same devastating consequences. Ultimately,

they rebelled against the Lord while pursuing idolatry without restraint and would suffer the full penalty, which is nothing short of death.

These four short verses are brief to allow for meditation. These are the weighty days of Lent that call us to contemplation and realignment to the values of God. In verses 9-11, I read that oftentimes the poor are better off before God because it produces dependence and devotion to God. The rich can easily be tempted by self-sufficiency and pride. Proverbs 30:7-9 highlights this foundational principle, leading to a focus on the eternal, which we read about in verse 12.

Those who remain strong when faced with temptation (which is sometimes translated “testing”), will enjoy the reward of heaven and the crown of life. Those who keep their eyes on eternity are able to stand firm in the face of temptation. God’s ways are proclaimed in these four short verses, for sure! How might God be speaking to you through them?

DAY 24 – Ezekiel 24 & James 1:13-18

The first 14 verses use another word picture of a cooking pot. Boiling meat for a meal seems positive, stirring up expectations of good food and fellowship. Various choice pieces of sacrificial animals had been gathered, a fire was kindled underneath the pot, and the contents were brought to a simmer. However, as in many parables, there is a sting in the tail of the story. What ought to have been a tasty meal had become a foul, profane mess. The choice pieces of meat were discovered to be corrupt when they came out. The pot represented Jerusalem (V9); its contents would be burned and destroyed. This creative twist of judgment continues through Ezekiel. Now, he will be the victim as his wife will die, and he is commanded by God not to mourn. Ezekiel would personally enter into the devastation of a desecrated Temple and the loss of sons and daughters throughout Judah, with God’s command not to mourn. The people had not mourned for their own sin; they would in turn not mourn in the midst of God’s punishment. Ezekiel’s journey and his willingness to live out his prophecy continue to make the book of Ezekiel very fascinating but still very difficult to read. Can you imagine losing a loved one and not mourning? This prophecy is especially deep and displays God’s intense disappointment with his people.

In some ways, our reading can be simplified with the negative of temptation and the positive of God’s goodness. Verses 13-15 remind me of Paul’s teaching on the “flesh.” We might define the flesh as my selfish desire to govern my own life. When we blame God for temptation, we err in our understanding of God’s goodness and minimize the role we have in not sinning. Both paragraphs are united by the phrase “give birth.” When we ignore the infant subtlety of sin’s temptation, we can find ourselves on the slippery slope of spiritual decline. But if we embrace the goodness of God and his gift of life, we can enjoy his presence and blessings because we are

his prized possession. What stands out to you in this reading, contrasting the pull of the flesh and promises of God?

DAY 25 – Ezekiel 25 & James 1:19-27

This chapter begins a section of rebuke to the surrounding nations for their sins of pride and their assault against God's people. God's judgment on these nations was meant to reinforce the sovereignty of God over all things. Each one of these four sections in chapter 25 ends with this phrase, "that they may know that I am the Lord." Ezekiel's mission was to confront the people of God, but he also affirms the Abrahamic covenant, which says, "I will... curse those who treat you with contempt." (Genesis 12:3) No one can shed the blood of God's people and escape unscathed, even when God's people are themselves under judgment.

I find these words (1:19-27) both practical and challenging; how about you? Verse 19 is a favorite proverb for me. This could be the sole focus for me today because I talk often, I listen poorly, and I can get angry when things don't go my way. None of these tendencies match the call to godliness. In fact, James says that anger does NOT produce righteousness (V20). First, we listen intently to God's word and then make sure to apply it to our lives. We must stare deeply into God's truth, or we will easily forget. "Slow to speak" will be an important theme to James as he says more in verse 26 and much more in James 3. Don't you think these words match Matthew 7:24-27? James wants his readers to build their lives on the ROCK. What is the rock? What aspect of these practical verses might the Lord want you to really absorb as you meditate on this passage?

WEEK 6

Ezekiel's emphasis is on the nations surrounding Israel who have gloated over the demise of God's people. These messages remind God's people that God does not operate on a double standard, judging the sins of his own people while the nations around them were free to act as they wished. Sometimes a parent can be harder on their own children than on other children who disobey with even more disrespect. These chapters show that God punishes sin impartially. James will again address such practical issues as favoritism, faith and works, the words we use, and the depth of wisdom available from heaven. I am delighted that we are reading this New Testament book along with Ezekiel. This gives us a rich and deep connection with God's Word.

DAY 26 – Ezekiel 26 & James 2:1-7

The judgment against Tyre will last for three chapters, as their demise is certain and their punishment severe. They gloated over the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Lord noticed. They will not live to regret their pride because they will become as nothing. Babylon will bring its huge army and demolish the city, and other enemies will have their way against Tyre as well. Ezekiel brings the funeral song for the city (Ezekiel 26:17-18) and its inevitable death. We are not done reading about God's judgment on Tyre, which will continue tomorrow.

Doesn't the practicality of this topic and others like it surprise you? Somehow, I make the assumption that favoritism is a modern problem. The rich get richer, and the opposite is true for the poor. Plus, the poor are often overlooked in modern society, but this was also true in the 1st century. The issue with this is God's displeasure. What they were doing was sinful. The principle of the Bible is given here with the humble being exalted and the proud being humbled. Something else is equally true, in my opinion and observation, the poor are more receptive to the Gospel than the rich. In fact, Jesus said it was difficult for a rich person to get to heaven because they too often loved their wealth or counted on their status to get them in. Our greatest status is found in Jesus. By faith, we belong to him, and it doesn't get any better than that until we enter heaven. God loves all people, and we must do the same as his children.

DAY 27 – Ezekiel 27 & James 2:8-13

Ezekiel adds to his funeral song for Tyre in verses 3 to 8. The contrast in this chapter compares past glory with present loss. Tyre's past greatness is poetically described in the first half of this chapter, and then, beginning in verse 26, Tyre's apparently unsinkable ship will be sunk by the "mighty eastern gale," the army of Babylon. All the surrounding trading partners of Tyre would

feel the crunch of judgment on this wealthy city. The obvious lesson has to do with our treasure. Do we base our happiness and contentment on the material world or on the infinite blessings of God? Matthew 6:25-34 comes to mind as Jesus confronts worry and one's focus on the things of this life. It didn't work out well for Tyre, and neither should we let it get a foothold in our lives.

There are nuggets of truth to focus our time of contemplation, as is our approach to reading James so slowly. The monumental command of loving your neighbor gets our attention alongside the principle of breaking one law, then you break them all. I have always interpreted this principle with the idea of never breaking any laws and earning my way to heaven, which is a common idea among the religions of the world. But if I break one law in an effort to earn my way, I immediately fall short. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, right?! (Romans 3:23) And did you notice the principle of passing on what God has so graciously given you? God has been merciful to you, which, in part, is meant to inspire you to be merciful. This coincides with forgiveness, forgive as you have been forgiven. Also, comfort as you comfort others with the comfort you have received from God. Gifts from God are like the anointing that fills our cups to overflowing. While we walk this earth, the Lord wants us to share what he has given us. His love is immense, so much so that we will have plenty to share. We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19) There is a lot to think about in these verses. I appreciate the teaching, challenge, and inspiration of James.

DAY 28 – Ezekiel 28 & James 2:14-26

Ezekiel begins another round of judgments on Tyre in this chapter. We have already learned about the pride of this pagan city. But nothing gets my attention more than verses 12-19, which have often been interpreted as words of demise for the devil. The double meaning is likely since the King of Tyre was not in Eden, but the Serpent tempting Eve was. Some scholars have seen the connection to God's curse on the Serpent in Genesis 3:15 as well as other Scriptures that tell us that Satan was kicked out of heaven because of his rebellion (Revelation 12:7-9). Ezekiel's words seem similar. Verses 13-15 have language that supersedes what could be true for a human king. But not every scholar's interpretation comes to this conclusion, just so you know. The King of Tyre was obviously a devilish man and would be brought down by a foreign king of great power, none other than Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 20, Ezekiel also prophesies against Sidon, which is often mentioned alongside Tyre throughout the Bible. Before Ezekiel's words of warning and doom are complete, he gives hope and promise to Israel in verses 24-26, which is just like the Lord, who continues to love his people.

How's this for a Scripture reading that has been debated by many!? No one would say that you can be saved by works, but many would say that having works reveals that you are saved. But

personally, I don't think that is a helpful way to interpret these verses, because how many good works are good enough? Only God knows the truth of your spiritual condition. Just saying you are saved isn't convincing to me. I can only assess what is true by what I see. If someone says they are saved but do not show it, their faith is useless because it does not make a difference in this world. It actually does more harm than good because people sense some hypocrisy in a believer who behaves like an unbeliever. This might be a questionable interpretation, but only God knows who is saved. The way I see salvation is reflected in a person's attitudes and actions, right?! The impact of faith is intended to change one's life. Our church has a motto—where the Gospel fuels transformation. Salvation includes the Spirit coming into our hearts to live. The Spirit gives us access to the divine nature, which will change us from the inside out. No change is confusing and causes people to question if that person has genuine faith. How do you respond to the challenging words of James?

DAY 29 – Ezekiel 29 & James 3:1-12

Egypt was mighty in those days, but like other pagan nations had so much pride. The date of Ezekiel's original prophetic judgment is 587BC, a year before Jerusalem was overthrown. But Egypt will plod along, knowing that her days are numbered, whether most Egyptians even believed that. But 17 years later, Nebuchadnezzar will have his way in Egypt by defeating them and dragging the populace away. Ezekiel suggests that the Israelites had looked to Egypt for help, but would realize that this was grievous to God, and the downfall of Egypt would teach them not to trust in human power. (V16) This verse caught my eye the most: "Then Israel will no longer be tempted to trust in Egypt for help. Egypt's shattered condition will remind Israel of how sinful she was to trust Egypt in earlier days. Then Israel will know that I am the Sovereign Lord." The Lord wants us to trust him instead of putting our hope in money, people, or status.

Is there anything more practical than examining the words we use? James tells us that if a person can control their tongue, their whole life will be governed well. The illustrations that James uses are very understandable: the bit for a horse, the rudder for a ship, and the spark of a forest fire. These all point to the power of the tongue for evil or for good. I have always found this teaching so important, mostly because I have the opportunity to teach God's truth, which means "judged more strictly." (V1) Every one of us can relate to this topic as we use our words every day. I can't remember which author I have read who taught that we can use life words or death words. James says it this way, "Blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth... my brothers and sisters, this is not right!" (V10). I'm quite sure no explanation is necessary for you to grasp what this teaching says to you.

DAY 30 – Ezekiel 30 & James 3:13-18

Egypt might have leaned on its allies, but they, too, would be destroyed (V6). The words of prophecy match the content from yesterday. The power of Babylon is specifically referenced as the day of Egypt's certain destruction (V9). Again, these words are given well in advance, with, possibly, an opportunity to repent as with Jonah and Nineveh in the Book of Jonah. As Ezekiel is speaking these words, Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonians. The Egyptians would have no interest in helping God's people, and Ezekiel knew that. The judgment is just and will happen just as Ezekiel has proclaimed. This seems to be another rebuke from God on Israel as well. Israel didn't turn to God but would often turn to Egypt for help. Egypt would not be interested in helping Israel, as one of its prophets predicts doom for them. Trusting is a human ability, and resources are the default for people throughout history. This has always been and always will be grievous to God.

The topic of wisdom seems especially important, and the way James writes about it matches Proverbs, in my opinion. There is a comparison in verses 13-16. Many proverbs have this contrasting element in them. But verses 17-18 are my favorite because they clearly define wisdom from above. Wisdom is too often associated with intellect. But character has more depth, and it is much more meaningful to me. What stands out to you from the contrast in verses 13-16? How do you respond to the definition of wisdom James gives? The idea of tenderness and peace-loving makes wisdom softer, all the while being strong indeed. I long to grow in wisdom, and I believe, as God has helped me, I have!

WEEK 7

Ezekiel will confront Egypt some more for the first two readings, and then we will finally take a turn with Ezekiel giving Israel the hope they need in the midst of suffering and captivity. Chapter 34 has always been important to me as Ezekiel confronts the “shepherds” of God’s people. This will set up a strong message about the “one shepherd” that we all need. There will be many new promises from Ezekiel from here on out, which are still a blessing to us even today. Your desire to read the rest of these chapters from Ezekiel will surely increase.

The last two chapters in James (4&5) are filled with ideas and principles we desire to honor, which lead to a fruitful spiritual life. The importance of prayer, the need to resist the devil, the character of humility that is so essential, the trouble with self-reliance, etc., are just a few of the impactful topics we will read about this week in James.

DAY 31 – Ezekiel 31 & James 4:1-3

The natural thing for humans to do is to find their security in wealth, possessions, and status. Egypt was known for all of these. Ezekiel challenges the Egyptians to remember Assyria. She was known for her empire and great prowess. But what happened to Assyria? It was crushed by a greater nation, and Egypt will be the same. Verses 10 & 11 summarize the chapter the best, in my opinion: “Because Egypt became proud and arrogant, and because it set itself so high above the others, with its top reaching to the clouds, I will hand it over to a mighty nation that will destroy it as its wickedness deserves.” That is the essential concern and judgment from Ezekiel found in this chapter.

These three verses in our reading lead to answered prayer. They give us important insights into why our prayers fall short of being answered and end up ineffective. James will write these words in chapter 5, “The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.” But this is not so for the person who is selfish and full of jealousy. Verse 3 is the verse of meditation I focus on. What are my motives in prayer? The first issue is not even asking in verse 2b. But the other concern is asking with wrong motives. Earlier, James said you ask for wisdom (1:5), but you don’t have faith that you will get it. People talk to me all the time about unanswered prayers. But seldom do they ever consider their posture of righteousness before God. God delights in answering our prayers as they are aligned with his will. John said that when the truth of God remains in you, and you abide in him, ask whatever is on your heart, and he will answer. I desperately want to align my life with his, which is the key to answered

prayer. What do you think about these ideas? Why is the quality of your life important in prayer?

DAY 32 – Ezekiel 32 & James 4:4-10

We have been reading about God's judgment plan for Egypt because of her pride and idolatry. The timing of these words closely follows the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is warning Egypt that they are next in line. If the defeat of Egypt was devastating when Moses was used by God to deliver his people from slavery, this prediction from Ezekiel would be far worse. Once, Egypt thought of itself as the premier nation, but these events would reveal that they were no more powerful and prestigious than any other nation. They would now join the ranks of all the smaller nations around them in defeat. This chapter concludes the prophetic warning that will unfold in a short time, in less than 15 years, Egypt will be overthrown by Babylon.

I received an invitation from a large church in Minneapolis to be their Singles Pastor. I had served the church for about five months, and the pastor asked me to share a sermon in August of 1988 before the congregation of 2000 adults. My passage was James 4:4-10. It was not hard to embrace the Scripture since I already felt very humbled by the opportunity to preach to so many. I had never spoken to that many people at once. I vaguely remember the theme of humility... we are humbled by our own susceptibility to sin; we are humbled by our vulnerability to the devil; we are humbled by the greatness of God. What aspect of humility are you noticing in this passage? Why is humility so important to God? The timeless principle of God stands out to me: "God opposes the proud but give grace to the humble." After meditating on these words, how do you sense God speaking to you?

DAY 33 – Ezekiel 33 & James 4:11-17

To me, this chapter represents an affirmation and reminder for Ezekiel of his important role as a prophet of God. The idea of a "watchman" fits right in line with the calling of a prophet. Since the people weren't listening to Ezekiel, he might have been tempted to keep quiet. God is warning him again that he must not. Ezekiel was to emphasize the present situation rather than let the people dwell on the past. If the people had previously honored the Lord, that would mean nothing if they were now living in sin. But if they had disobeyed the Lord and now repented, the Lord would bless them because of it. Sometimes we can base our spiritual status on what has been true in the past, but no longer governs our lives. This is a reminder to us about living for God, day by day, with authenticity and honesty. Also, after the certainty of Jerusalem's defeat, Ezekiel is freed to speak about a future hope. But the people would think of

it like “a pie in the sky” notion from the prophet that the Lord plans to restore his people. Even the exiles in Babylon did not actually believe Ezekiel.

Our tendency to judge others and rely on ourselves is confronted by James in our reading today. This reading through James is reminding me of how practical and important this book is for wisely living the Christian life. Don’t you agree?! In both cases, God is in charge. The Lord is the one who judges and will be the ultimate judge for every person who has ever lived. Plus, God is the source of every blessing and the one who has authority over life and death. Why do we think so arrogantly and suggest that our plans are always God’s plans? Too often, we live as if God were only a watchful observer. This human-centered approach to life is far too common among believers and grieves God. How might you fall into that trap? The last verse of our reading is most compelling to me. “Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.” We call this the sin of omission. We might focus on the problem of disobedience and still neglect the importance of obeying God. Something to think about...

DAY 34 – Ezekiel 34 & James 5:1-6

The shepherds of God’s people have neglected the needs of the sheep. The confrontation is directed to the leaders of Israel and their role to shepherd the people. They have not protected or provided for the needs of the people as God had required. The role of a shepherd is pastoral in nature, and isn’t it interesting that the leaders in God’s church are called pastors? I take that calling seriously, but I don’t do it alone. The mature believers in the Body are called to do the same. The Lord is very disappointed in their leadership. As the chapter unfolds, we might anticipate something about the Messiah or the Good Shepherd. In verses 23 & 24, David is called the servant shepherd, but David has already died. There’s no doubt that Ezekiel is referring to the offspring of David. This “new David,” like the first one, would be the Lord’s servant, a man after God’s own heart, and a good shepherd of his people. This leads to some hopeful words from Ezekiel with the re-establishing of God’s covenant of peace for his people. The last verse in the chapter is a great summary of the heart of God. “You are my flock, the sheep of my pasture. You are my people, and I am your God.” These words remind me of Psalm 95:6-7: “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.”

This paragraph in James is quite sobering, especially since we live in such an affluent place on earth. God is a generous God and is the provider of everything we have. But when people do not acknowledge that fact, the Lord is upset and sure to get our attention for the sin of greed and self-sufficiency. In Matthew 6, we read about God’s perspective concerning money and possessions. He tells us not to worry, but also not to store up earthly treasures, for they are

temporary and deteriorate. James uses similar words about these earthly treasures. What does it mean to you to store up treasures in heaven? (Mt 6:19-21) How do you respond to these strong words from James about materialism? There is also a strong warning about treating workers (employees) fairly. God will judge landowners who exploit their laborers, as it says in verse 4. The kingdom of God is not like the kingdom of this world. The poor who live for Christ will be exalted now and for sure in eternity. But the self-sufficient who find their meaning by accumulating things of the earth will face the severity of their unbelief on the day of judgment. Be rich toward the things of God and poor with regard to worldly wisdom and wealth; one day the justice of God will prevail. How challenging is that?

DAY 35 – Ezekiel 35 & James 5:7-12

There's no doubt that Israel and Edom were arch-enemies. Probably not unlike Israel and Iran. Israel was soundly defeated by Babylon, and it seems that Edom had a great celebration, rejoicing in the demise of Judah. By 400 BC, Edom would be no more. The Edomites had boasted and elevated themselves against both Israel and the Lord. The God of Israel does not tolerate such boasting, for he is sovereign. Edom had a poor reputation among the nations, so that when they suffered defeat, "the whole world rejoiced." (V14)

It is very normal for authors to close their letters with some final instructions. These can seem random, but they were obviously important to the author and practical in daily living. Patiently waiting for the Lord is a biblical theme along with the hope of Christ's second coming. The negative behavior of grumbling has never been acceptable to God. The Israelites grumbled, and the Lord rebuked them for it. The perseverance of the Prophets and the example of Job are meant to encourage patience even when one suffers. Making vows and taking an oath must have been a familiar topic in biblical times, with negative results. Time and again, the Bible teaches to stay away from oaths because they are promises that are sealed in the name of God and too often broken. Again, I think these were challenging issues in the 1st century and still have relevance today.

James 5:13-20 gives us a very important message about the power of prayer. We highlight verses 13-16 in church because it gives us instruction for the church on praying for the emotional, spiritual, and physical needs in the church body. Whether you are happy or suffering, whether sick or sinful, James gives clear teaching on what to do. Elders are leaders in the church, and highlighting them as praying people makes their leadership more personal and places their authority and shepherding front and center in church life. But my favorite statement in these verses is what James wrote in verse 16, "The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results." Elijah is mentioned as a practical

example of the power of prayer. I didn't want to leave these verses hanging over into next week's readings, so I thought we could take into account their significance as a part of today's reading and ask God to help us apply them to our lives. Amen!

WEEK 8

We have a few weeks left in Ezekiel, but we have finished James, so another good companion for the rest of Ezekiel is Colossians. Some of my favorite chapters are scheduled for this week from the Prophet Ezekiel. His prediction of the Spirit living within believers is very inspiring, and the wonder of a valley of dry bones coming to life is especially fascinating. We have a special week of readings for us after hearing about God's judgment on the sinful people all around Israel. We now take in the promises of God to restore and to bless, which are proclaimed by Ezekiel.

There's no doubt that Paul's letter to the Colossians plays an important role in building a truthful foundation for our faith, as well as what it means to live it out. Theology and practice will intersect as we read about having fullness in Christ. One of the strongest and deepest Christian hymns of the 1st Century will highlight this first week in Colossians.

DAY 36 – Ezekiel 36 & Colossians 1:1-6

This is the chapter I have been waiting for. There are several verses in this reading that I have focused on previously. They are tied to the New Covenant because they tell us that the Spirit would live in us. This is the promise of Pentecost and the truth for all believers in Jesus Christ. "I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations." (V27) The promise is also to change us from the inside out. God will give us a new heart... take out our stony, stubborn heart and give us a tender, responsive heart. (V26) The whole chapter is filled with hopeful words throughout this reading, even though I am stuck on the beauty and promises of verses 22 to 32. The chapter gives Israel a vision of restoration, but the work of the Spirit would be for all people. The implication of this new life produced by the Spirit has a widespread impact, enabling believers to live holy lives. This is the most important promise because it has lasting results. The city can be rebuilt, but then destroyed again. But the heart being made new changes everything for the good and forever. The exiles can see light at the end of the tunnel, but beyond that is the plan of God to pour out his Spirit on mankind as they turn to him and open their lives to the work of the Spirit, ultimately found in Jesus. (Joel 2:28-29)

Paul's greeting to the believers in Colosse is similar to other letters he wrote. His emphasis on the Good News (Gospel) is also a common theme in his writings. As a church, we point to the Gospel in our motto, "Where the Gospel fuels transformation." Paul essentially says the same thing in verse 6, "It (the Gospel) is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed

your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace." The Gospel is the message that leads to salvation and promises God's Spirit to live in us. Paul was congratulating them for embracing the Gospel with confident hope. I want to be used like Paul to stir up your affection and appreciation for the Gospel. Nothing surpasses its significance for the believer. A growing love and understanding of this Good News will change each of us internally, but also ignite us to share it. Amen!

DAY 37 – Ezekiel 37 & Colossians 1:7-14

The first 14 verses are nothing short of miraculous. This scene has always drawn me in and caused me to imagine what is going on. Verse 11 tells me that the dry bones are people who are weary, hopeless, and cut off from God and others. This is descriptive of the exiles and their spiritual and emotional well-being; they are hopeless. After we read about the resurrection of lifeless bones, Ezekiel prophesied that Judah and Ephraim would be one; the south and the north no longer divided. This is a heavenly vision of sorts, which gave the exiles hope then and also speaks to us today on the power of God to renew our lives as well. How often have you felt empty, hopeless, and alone? God sees and understands when we are spiritually dry and feel discouraged. But his wind and breath have the same power today as they did then. These words have implications for what God would do through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We were dead in our sins, but Christ through the Spirit raised us up to new life. (John 3:5-7 & Ephesians 2:1-7) I have written a sermon on verses 1 to 11 and modified it several times, but I have shared it in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Costa Rica, Kenya, and Mexico. What a privilege, and each and every time broken, discouraged people in these countries stepped forward to receive prayer and be renewed in hope. This is the nature of our God!

It seems like one guy was used by God to bring the Good News to Colosse. We have no record of Paul ever going there. But a courageous believer named Epaphras shared Christ with his hometown, and a church was established. Epaphras could have heard the Gospel in Ephesus and carried the message back to Colosse; at least that is the conclusion some Bible scholars have reached. If so, I am inspired by Epaphras, who served as a missionary to his own people. Paul's concern for them has to do with their growth in the faith, which will produce joy and point people to the life of Christ. Paul wants them to appreciate what they have received and also share it with others. "For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his dear Son..." (V13) What Paul is writing in this letter is so relevant to any believer then and now. As we read this letter together, it is sure to stimulate your faith and your walk with Christ.

DAY 38 – Ezekiel 38 & Colossians 1:15-20

Ezekiel's prophecy in this chapter is quite abrupt after the hopeful vision of renewal given in chapters 36 & 37. Who is Gog? The way it is written, Gog is the last enemy. Biblically speaking, Ezekiel's words are thought of as "apocalyptic" literature. Apocalyptic refers to the unveiling prophecy of the impending destruction of the world. Interpretations from Biblical Scholars about the nations forming an alliance against God's people have speculated Russia, Iran, nations in northern Africa, and so on. The timing is described in verse 8, "A long time from now you will be called into action." But these words are imprecise, so they can mean the embattled nation of Israel, which has taken place time and again, will be at war throughout history. But with the formation of Israel since 1948, the anticipation points to something more final. But as big and arrogant as Gog will be, this devilish "nation" will be ultimately defeated by the power of our Sovereign God. (Verses 21-23)

This Christ hymn, as it is sometimes called, about Jesus, expresses the magnitude that the Lord deserves. Don't you just love the depth and significance of this poetic tribute to the identity of Jesus!? Hebrews 1:2-4 does the same thing with similar language of exaltation. Which line or verse are you drawn to most? Why? The phrase that has been debated from time to time is "the firstborn over all creation" (NIV) is translated "supreme over all creation" in the NLT. The debate is with the idea of Jesus being created and thus, only human. Firstborn does not mean he was created; it is a title, drawn from the OT, indicating supremacy of rank and priority in time. The majority of the hymn highlights the divine nature of Christ, which is so important to our understanding of Jesus. But in verse 20, his sacrifice and crucifixion are the culminating truth of these verses, with reconciliation and peace provided "by means of Christ's blood on the cross." So marvelous!!!

DAY 39 – Ezekiel 39 & Colossians 1:21-23

The words in this chapter do not seem as final as those in the previous chapter. The preservation of Israel is foremost in the words of the prophet. The extent of the battle and the bloodshed associated with it does equal a massive defeat for Gog and Magog, even though these mighty nations are very difficult to identify. The task of disposing of the dead bodies is said to take 7 months. (V12) The return of the exiles also points to Old Testament dates that predate Christ's arrival in verses 25 to 29. A unique promise that had to be thrilling to the exiles says, "And I will never again turn my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit upon the people of Israel." This will enable them to follow the Lord and honor him year after year. This kind of promise also has a New Testament ring to it, in my opinion. Romans 8:37-39 promises that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of Christ. Chapter 39 left me with more

questions than answers. But the prophecies about Gog and against Gog still seem apocalyptic to me. What do you think?

In our reading from Colossians, I want to suggest a very meditative approach to this short section. Paul elaborates on these truths in Ephesians 2:1-10. We were without hope, separated from God by our sinful thoughts and actions. But God, through Christ, gave us access to his salvation and presence. And because of our relationship with Christ, we are seen as holy and blameless. In other words, justified in God's sight. The Apostle Paul wants them to realize how fortunate they are, and because of that, they would never want to retreat. There was a lot of pressure on these believers, as there were false teachers and others who were opposed to the Gospel. Again, the Gospel is front and center with Paul as he takes great pleasure in spreading the Good News all over the world. (V23) What has the Holy Spirit highlighted for you in this reading?

DAY 40 – Ezekiel 40 & Colossians 1:24-29

This final section of Ezekiel focuses on the new Temple. This seems both literal and figurative because the Temple represents more than a building. The Temple plan given, beginning in this chapter and subsequent chapters, does not seem physically buildable, nor does that seem like the intent. The construction of a Temple in line with this prophetic word has never been undertaken. The diagrams I looked at in my research display a huge structure, nothing like the one that Ezra and the people of Jerusalem built in 516 BC. Ezekiel completed his prophetic ministry in 571 BC. Even though the vision of Ezekiel seemed very detailed, the size, the lack of specifics, like what materials to use, and the overall design are unrealistic, leading some scholars to suggest it is yet to be built and might be reserved for the millennial kingdom. The spiritual lesson could be that the Temple represents the capstone of God's program of restoring and sanctifying his people so that he could once again dwell in their midst.

There are a number of touch points for me in these 6 verses. The Colossian believers were facing difficulty, opposition, and suffering, so Paul ties his sufferings to the fact that Christ suffered also. That is always important to remember. The mystery of the Gospel is no longer a mystery or secret but has been proclaimed and now received by both Jews and Gentiles. The profound reality of the Gospel is to receive salvation and the life of Christ in you! "And this is the secret: Christ lives in you!" (V27) The Jews had this apocalyptic idea of God's secrets kept in heaven until God revealed them in his Son. The Jews don't believe that Jesus represents the mystery, but previously they thought God's entire plan already existed in heaven, and now Paul is telling the Gentiles that this secret has been revealed in Christ. What a treasure that was/is available for pagan Gentiles to receive salvation upon believing the mystery given in Jesus

Christ. Gentiles have been believing this ever since. Finally, Paul says something very profound in verse 29. He answers the question about how we grow. Is it God's doing or my doing? My answer, according to Paul, is "yes." "That's why I work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me." How do you understand the relationship between God's activity and my effort? In other words, how does God's sovereignty and my free will work together?

WEEK 9

These readings seem less important and not that relevant, but the message is one of hope and renewal. The focus is on the final Temple and the establishment of the land. With architectural, ritual, and symbolic imagery, Ezekiel's final vision depicts the same as the rest of the book: God will raise his people to a new level of holiness so that he can once again dwell in their midst. A river of life flows out from the Temple, and as it flows, it grows and transforms death into life. Many scholars see a greater revelation of hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the words of Ezekiel. Keep that in mind as you read.

Since there were many false teachers roaming the land trying to distort the message of Christ, the Apostle Paul, in this letter to the Colossians, is reaffirming the truth of their new life in Christ and what that means. The believers must stand firm in their faith, and Paul is trying to help them do so. There was also a strong emphasis on following the law, which included many manmade laws. The Jewish focus on the law pressed believers into legalism. As always, Paul's writings will help us in our walk with Christ so that we, too, may stand firm in faith.

DAY 41 – Ezekiel 41 & Colossians 2:1-5

Isn't it fascinating how precise the wording is from Ezekiel?! As you might expect, the Most Holy Place got my attention in verses 3 & 4. As a Priest would approach the Holy Place, he would pass through openings that got smaller and smaller. The entrance to the Temple area was 24 ½ feet wide, and the doorway into the sanctuary was 17 ½ feet wide, but the entrance to the Most Holy Place was only 10 ½ feet wide. Ezekiel did not enter the Most Holy Place, but waited outside while the angel went in alone and measured it. The thickness of the walls, the lack of a rear entrance, the rooms surrounding the inner Temple... all pointed to the reverence of approaching the presence of God.

Paul writes to the believers at Colosse like a big brother. He is very concerned about their well-being and their stability. If they are anchored in the truth and realize that they possess the presence of Christ, they will stand firm. (V3) Laodicea might be thought of as a sister city since it was located only 10 miles north of Colosse. Paul includes the believers in Laodicea as he writes to the Colossians. The verses that got my close attention, even to meditate on their importance, were verses 2b & 3: "I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God's mysterious plan, which is Christ himself. In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Do you think that Jesus was the wisest person to ever walk the earth? I don't think

we understand the magnitude of the Lord's perfection and intellect. What might God be saying to you through these illuminating words from today?

DAY 42 – Ezekiel 42 & Colossians 2:6-10

This chapter includes more details for the construction of the Temple. The rooms closest to the inner courtyard that overlook the Temple are holy. (V13) Having finished his tour of the inner courtyard, Ezekiel was shown the overall dimensions of the area. The whole complex was square, which denoted holiness. It was also quite large, measuring 3 football fields on each side. Only the Most Holy Place was square in Solomon's Temple, as well as the Tabernacle before it. Ezekiel reminds us again that the purpose of the surrounding wall was to separate what was holy from what was common. The vision of God's glory tomorrow in the next chapter is sure to be a bit more inspiring.

Again, five short verses in Colossians allow us time to really absorb Paul's message. The two key themes are spiritual growth and the significance of Christ. If the Colossians continue to grow, "rooted and built up in him," (V6) they will remain strong and steadfast as believers. Plus, don't let anyone fool you into thinking Christ is less than God. Paul uses a marvelous expression to elevate the Lord, "For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body." These two foundational truths, growth in Christ and holding on to Christ as God, will keep the Colossians on track even when the false teachers share their enticing arguments.

DAY 43 – Ezekiel 43 & Colossians 2:11-15

This is definitely a vision since Ezekiel is in Babylon as one of the exiles. The vision of God's glory is the most compelling as Ezekiel ends up face down on the ground again. (V3) The details of the Temple send a message of God's desired holiness for his people. "Son of Man, describe to the people of Israel the Temple I have shown you, so they will be ashamed of all their sins." (V10) Previously, Ezekiel's instructions pertained to the architectural design, but now he focuses on what is central to their worship, the Altar! The altar would be placed in the geometric center of the entire Temple. It was described in such a way that the dimensions of it were three times the size of the altar in the Tabernacle. Worship and sacrifice would dominate the spiritual pursuit of the people. They would approach God, knowing they needed forgiveness, which would then be provided through the blood sacrifice of an animal. We learned about these requirements in the Book of Leviticus, of course. We approach God in the same way with confession of sin and praise to his name. Jesus provides us access so that we can freely approach God and adore God!

There's a lot to chew on in these verses. The emphasis on what Christ has done for us is always worthwhile. What stood out to you from Paul's unique presentation of what the cross means to us? I noticed the analogy of circumcision as I understand the physical procedure of cutting, so too, Paul likens this to cutting away the sinful nature when we were spiritually circumcised by Christ through faith. Our sinful flesh is cut away, and the new life of Christ is given to us by the mighty power of God. Verse 13 sounds very much like Ephesians 2:1, declaring that we were dead in our sins/transgressions. Forgiveness is essential before we can truly receive the new life offered by the Lord. Christ canceled our debt on the cross first, and then we acknowledged our need for forgiveness and began a new life. But the words of verses 14 & 15 deepen the significance of what Christ did on the cross. The Lord took the charges we deserved and paid the penalty, which was death. This is all well and good, but verse 15 makes an even more profound statement with the defeat of the spiritual forces of darkness. The Roman army would celebrate a great victory with a triumphal procession. The victorious Roman general would lead the humiliated captives from his campaign into the conquered city. The image vividly captures the glorious victory that God, through the cross of Christ, has won over all hostile spiritual powers. Praise God for that!

DAY 44 – Ezekiel 44 & Colossians 2:16-23

The instruction of this chapter reminds me of Leviticus, but there are references that Ezekiel would be utilizing from Numbers and Deuteronomy as well. This Temple could actually honor the original purpose of inhabiting God's presence. Verse 2 tells us that the Lord (Yahweh) entered through the east gate, which was now never to be used again. The Lord made this gate holy by using it as his entry point. No one else was ever to enter through it. The presentation that Ezekiel delivers clearly emphasizes the holiness of God, and these regulations and limitations are meant to protect that special holiness. Previously, the people did not follow these directives, and this new Temple would give them the opportunity to honor the way of the Lord again. It would be like a second chance. Isn't that just like our God?! Does anything catch your eye regarding the operation of God's Temple?

The reading in Colossians is a very important teaching on the subject of legalism and required religious rituals. Most religions in the world present these kinds of rules and religious teachings. But Paul is clear that these are only a shadow of the real thing. (V17) The false teachers were very influential as they insisted that Christians should follow certain rules and laws to prove their faith. They would go to the extreme of saying that God gave them a vision to worship angels. But Paul confronts this idea as false. The concluding verse gives us insightful truth about why people get hooked by legalism. "These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. (They have to be good then, right?) But

they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires." (V23) The law ultimately shows us how we fall short every time. Only a Christ-centered relationship empowered by the Holy Spirit leads to freedom and obedience. This paragraph is core to Paul's theology and we do well to remember we are hopeless if we must earn God's favor. How do you respond to these insightful words from the Apostle Paul?

DAY 45 – Ezekiel 45 & Colossians 3:1-4

Ezekiel's concern was not simply in promising that the land would be divided among them in a fair way. He wanted to remind them of what the Promised Land was about in the first place. It was a land in which God would dwell among his people. So, the central part of the land would be assigned to the Lord as "his holy portion." The main purpose of this was to provide a zone of holiness and protection around the Temple. You can see how Chapters 44 & 45 overlap because of their great concern for honoring the presence of God among the people. The corruption of previous leaders was confronted and will not be tolerated anymore. "My princes will no longer oppress and rob my people..." (V8). They were allotted plenty of land for their purposes, and the rest of the land would meet the needs of the people. The last section points to Passover, which is an annual festival that is full of meaning for the Jews. Don't neglect organizing this seven-day festival, which honors the deliverance of God led by Moses during the Exodus. These chapters in Ezekiel are unfamiliar to me, but they do sound similar to the Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible. I believe Ezekiel's instruction points to a time of genuine renewal and prosperity for God's people. This then has a futuristic emphasis because what Ezekiel envisions has not happened yet.

This is a short reading, indeed, but it means so much to me. I have referred to these words hundreds of times. "Set your hearts... set your minds... on heaven!" If I can remember this instruction and focus, my life remains joyful and secure. Obviously, we live on earth, but as Paul said in Ephesians 2:6, "we are raised with Christ and seated in the heavenly realms." Spiritually, we have an inheritance kept in heaven for us through Christ. When we keep that in mind and orient ourselves to Christ's authority in heaven, we can live in victory on earth. Paul also says our lives are "now hidden with Christ," and by faith, we can be confident that no matter what might happen to us or take place around us on earth, we are secure. I think the truth expressed by Paul in these 4 verses is monumental, admonishing us to "fix our eyes on Jesus." How do you respond to this timeless paragraph written by the Apostle Paul?

WEEK 10

Can you believe it? We are three chapters away from finishing our journey through Ezekiel?! Amazing! There are parts of Ezekiel's prophecies that are monumental and have an eschatological meaning behind them. But other parts of his book take some real determination to read through and appreciate. The last section on Ezekiel's Temple vision was more difficult, which will also be true for these last three days. But that's okay because we are honoring the Lord and a prophet named Ezekiel by reading his book with discipline and openness. Thank you for sharing this journey with me.

The rest of Colossians gives us practical insights for Christian living. We begin with what to avoid at all costs and then what to embrace as a follower of Jesus. From there, the Apostle Paul will focus on our relationships in the Body of Christ. Some of these words are unique to this letter and others have a similar ring to what Paul wrote previously. Frankly, I am looking forward to our slow and meditative approach in Colossians this week, which will also bring us to the end of the letter.

DAY 46 – Ezekiel 46 & Colossians 3:5-11

I remind myself that the identity of the “prince” is debated. Most Evangelical scholars connected his involvement during the millennial reign of Christ. He can't be Jesus because in EZ 45:22, he is required to make a sin offering for himself. He definitely could be a leader, or ruler like David, with significant responsibilities, but still submissive to the priestly order. The direction given to the prince has both futuristic wording but also connected to the present-day issues like the 50-year jubilee. These prophetic words are hard to follow since this Temple, described by Ezekiel, has never been constructed. That's why most interpreters point to something that hasn't happened yet. Thus, this ends Ezekiel's words about the Temple, which is symbolic of how God wants to dwell among his people.

The Apostle Paul uses the familiar language of “put off” and “put on” in these verses. To simplify, he is essentially telling us to say “no” to sin and “yes” to the new life of living for Christ. Paul uses tough words to warn people about the coming wrath of God. There will be judgment, and God will avenge the sinful, selfish ways of living for those who reject his offer of grace through his Son. Paul wants the followers of Christ to strip off their old life and clothe themselves with Christ's new life, allowing him to be Lord and to guide the way they live. This reminds me of my involvement in the process of spiritual growth. Knowing the truth of God is important but without practicing it, the Word has little value. God's desire is to form you and

me into the image of Christ (Romans 8:30). My choices, my intentionality, my confession, etc., are all involved in God's work of shaping my life to be more like Jesus. What might you need to say "no" to; what might be an important "yes" for you in your relationship with Christ?

DAY 47 – Ezekiel 47 & Colossians 3:12-17

I read a few commentaries on this, and even though the picture of the river in Revelation 22 came to my mind, it wasn't always mentioned as how to identify this river. The water flow begins slowly and increases with healing and nourishing properties. This is inspirational to me and points to the culmination of God's plan to reign forever, just like how the Book of Revelation closes. However, some scholars see this prophecy as benefiting God's people sooner rather than later. It is fascinating, nonetheless, since it makes the Dead Sea come to life. I have been in the Dead Sea, which has some healing power due to the salt, and is also buoyant, so you can easily float on the top of the water. But nothing is really living in those waters. That will change according to Ezekiel, and it may be given to us as symbolic of God's renewal for his people, pictured through the dead bodies in the valley (Ez 37) and the dead waters of the sea. The second half of this chapter has to do with the boundaries and the distribution of the land. This pictures a united people when previously there were the northern and southern kingdoms. Also, the inclusion of foreigners gives us God's gracious heart for adoption, as they would be treated like the native-born Israelites. Tomorrow is not only our last reading in Ezekiel but also reflects the theological importance of dividing the land properly.

This has to be one of my favorite paragraphs in Colossians. The teaching begins with being chosen, loved, and holy. This is a great summary of our identity as children of God through Jesus Christ. The character of Christ flows out of our secure connection to Jesus. The intentionality of yesterday's emphasis on "put on" is now described as being clothed. These qualities of Christian character are very deep and also very challenging. Without Christ's presence, we would be up a creek without a paddle. Ha! The predominance of love is not surprising at all. The Scripture attests to this fact time and again: "the greatest of these is love." Verse 17 could easily be a believer's life verse: "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." How might God be speaking to you through these inspirational words?

DAY 48 – Ezekiel 48 & Colossians 3:18-4:1

I know this isn't especially interesting or practical to our lives today, but it represents something important. The division of the land is more about equality than location. Each tribe was to receive an equal portion of the land, arranged in east-to-west strips that oriented the whole

land on the same axis as the Temple at its center. These strips of land bear no connection to the actual geographic features of the land. The point seems to be that the old tribal jealousies and hatreds will be gone, as each tribe is on exactly the same footing as the others. The emphasis on the gates as the book comes to a close can seem anticlimactic. But the theme of access is central to the message about this Temple vision of Ezekiel. So, the last sentence of the book makes sense because the gates represent entering God's presence with verses 35 ending with, "The Lord Is There." You have completed one of the more challenging books of the Bible. Congratulations!

These practical instructions about everyday relationships in life have some noteworthy directions for us. Love and respect in marriage have significantly strengthened my marriage, along with the book "Love & Respect" by Eggerich. I also worked very hard not to "embitter" my children, even though it was necessary to express both tough and tender love. The equivalent of slaves in our modern-day world would be employees. How I respond to those in authority is a direct reflection of my faith. If I want to honor Christ, I need to honor those in charge. The paragraph about "slaves" is the longest. It seems to me that when people meet Christ, they have a new freedom. But that freedom does not give us permission to do our own thing. In fact, your witness at work will have an impact for good as you live in the fear of the Lord, or it may undermine your testimony if you act like you're a special class. Masters (employers) are also accountable to God as 4:1 clearly states. These instructions are important. How do you respond to Paul's teaching on everyday relationships?

DAY 4 THIS WEEK – Colossians 4:2-6

This paragraph means a lot to me, and it has been the focus of several of my teaching opportunities over the years. I just completed a class in Personal Evangelism for the Institute, and this paragraph was the focal point of "how to" effectively share your faith in Christ with others. The outline I gave was "Prayer, Care, Share." Do you see that emphasis in the reading for today? The Apostle Paul asked for prayer and wanted prayer as a forerunner to evangelism, right? Then, interact with people wisely and graciously. People need to know that we really care about them before they will trust what we say. An old saying, "Earn the right to be heard." But sharing the hope of Christ is the goal because we know that Jesus can change everything for a person. Paul ultimately wanted an open door to share the Gospel. Another way to say it would be to serve people well enough to naturally share the Good News of Jesus. Another way to outline this process of sharing the message of Jesus is to begin with Their Story, with the sincere desire to get to know people and demonstrate a genuine concern for them. After that, you ask if you might share some of Your Story. That means to tell someone else what is really important to you. But the best part is when this naturally leads to His Story with the power and beauty of the

Gospel being shared. Can you think of two or three people who need Christ that you might pray for? How might you step into their lives for friendship with a genuine desire to care about them? Then, ask God to give you the grace and the courage to share the truth of Jesus. How do you respond to this emphasis today?

DAY 5 THIS WEEK – Colossians 4:7-18

There are two things that come to mind as I read these personal notes from the Apostle Paul. I think of how intentional Paul was in befriending people and asking for their help in the mission. He valued the contribution of others and often affirmed them publicly. Which name caught your eye and why? Onesimus is a name I recognize from the book of Philemon because Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves who ran away. But Paul was sending him back to Colosse asking Philemon to forgive him because he is now a brother in Christ. The letter entitled Philemon is only 25 verses long so if you want to understand more of the story, I would read that letter as well. The second thing this brings to mind is the Body of Christ with God's plan to use a diversity of people to accomplish the mission and sustain the church. The false teachers were very deceptive and would try to "pick off" the most vulnerable and isolated. But if people are in this together and everyone realizes their importance to the work of Christ, the church and her mission will remain strong. The togetherness of God's people is a crucial aspect of God's plan. Who do you partner with in your walk with Christ and in your service on behalf of Christ? If you have a hard time answering that question, you are out of step with the will of God in your life. What does this final section tell us about encouraging fellow believers?