

# BIBLE CHALLENGE

## A 1 week study of the books of Ezekiel, Obadiah, and Lamentations

The story so far: With the conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BC the nation of Judah has fallen to the Babylonians, just as Israel in the north fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Most of the people of Judah have been deported to Babylon. This marks the lowest point in the history of God's people, in which those in exile were filled with questions about how God, who had chosen them as his own people, could have let this happen.

Ezekiel's ministry overlaps the time of Jeremiah. The first portion of Ezekiel's prophecy (chapters 1-33) occurs before the fall of Jerusalem and focuses on a call to the people to repent and turn back to God. The second part of Ezekiel (chapters 34-48) takes place after the fall of the south and contains promises for the future for those who now live in exile. Ezekiel understands their need for hope even as they feared God had abandoned them, for Ezekiel himself writes from exile. He too lived far away from home in a foreign land where his countrymen wondered if they would ever be able to return home.

### Monday:

Read Ezekiel 1:1-10, 15-20, 25-28, 3:1-3

What to look for:

- This is the story of Ezekiel's Call to speak the word of the Lord.
- The four-wheeled chariot in vs. 15ff is a spiritual chariot. Vs. 26 describes God's throne.
- Ezekiel is told in 3:1-3 to eat the scroll, to consume God's word. What a powerful image for the way the Scriptures are to be internalized until they become an indistinguishable part of us. How have you been nourished by your participation in the Bible Challenge? How might you share that nourishment with others?

### Tuesday:

Read Ezekiel 34:1-16, 23-24

What to look for:

- To keep our story line intact we will concentrate on the promises Ezekiel spoke to the people following the end of the nation.
- Ezekiel is indicting the nation's leaders. He is likening them to shepherds who have refused to care for their sheep. The nation has primarily been led by corrupt and faithless shepherds who have harmed the sheep rather than cared for them.
- Note vs. 11ff – God is promising to do what none of his human leaders have done: seek the lost. Compare this promise to Jesus' words in Luke 19:10, Luke 15:1-7, John 10:11-18.

Wednesday:

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14, 40:1-4, 48:35

What to look for:

- 37:1-14 is Ezekiel's most famous and stirring word of promise meant to give hope to those who continue in exile. God is able to restore even the deadest of things. What do you believe is so dead in your life that not even God could bring it back to life? Are you willing to risk letting him restore it? Would you describe the current state of your discipleship as more like the scattered field of brittle bones, or as the bones coming together and beginning to stir, or as the body alive and well?
- Chapters 40-48 contain a vision of a restored Jerusalem. The dry bones have come back to life. Note the name of the city. Earlier, Ezekiel had a vision of God leaving the temple and abandoning Jerusalem. Now God has returned to live with his people once again. To Ezekiel's fellow exiles who were wondering how all of this could have happened and whether God had deserted them, Ezekiel's message is: God had not given up on them.

Thursday:

Read Obadiah 1

What to look for:

- Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, probably written shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.
- The target for Obadiah's message was the people of Edom who lived just across the Jordan River. His charge against them had to do with the fact that the Edomites apparently had been cooperating with the Babylonians in the destruction of Judah. Note the progression of betrayal in the chapter, from standing aside in the face of the Babylonian onslaught (vs 11) to gloating over Judah's misfortune (vs. 12) to handing them over to the hands of their enemies (vs. 14). Making the whole situation bitterer was the fact that Edom was a relative, tracing its roots back to the squabble between Jacob and Esau over their birthright in Genesis. (Genesis 32:3 – see Bible Challenge week 4)
- Obadiah's message contains the conviction that God is just. Though God's people may not understand why God had let this happen, they could be sure that in his justice God would not let the wicked go unpunished (vs. 15-18)

Friday:

Read Lamentations 1:1-3, 2:18-21, 5:19-22

What to look for:

- Lamentations, written following the fall of Jerusalem, grieves over the distress that has come upon God's people.
- 1:1-3 sets the mood and context for the tragedy that has befallen them.

- 2:18-21 gives a hint of how intense was the suffering and how bad things became during the siege of Jerusalem. Not only did the children go hungry (vs. 19) but the people resorted to cannibalism just to survive (vs. 20). Note the pronouns in these verses: “Whom have *you* treated like this...”, “*You* have slain and slaughtered...” The author is blaming God for the horror.
- Note that there are exactly 22 verses in chapter 1 and chapter 2, 66 verses in chapter 3, and 22 verses in chapters 4 and 5. Lamentations is written as an acrostic, meaning that each verse in each chapter begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, i.e. 1:1 begins with the Hebrew *a*, 1:2 begins with the Hebrew *b*, etc. Chapter three repeats the pattern three times for each letter. Why is this important? Read 3:22-24. Right in the middle of the book comes an expression of comfort, just as is the case in the middle of our own suffering. It is in the midst of the deepest pain of our most intense suffering that we can find God’s consolation and promise of hope.