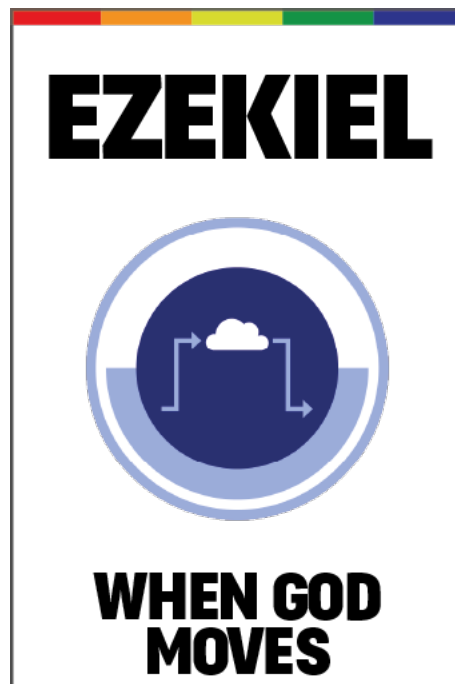




BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



Summary

Ezekiel was an exceptional prophet, willing not just to share what he heard and saw from God but do whatever God asked, and God asked him to do some incredible things.

This was at a critical time for God's people as God was moving them out of the land he promised them, and there are painful pictures here of what to expect in this process. These can help us in our reflections too when we feel that God might need to change or correct us.

But there is also hope and a glorious promise of what to expect when God's movement grows, producing new life in and around us.

Bern Leckie

Thursday August 27: Ezekiel 1-4

The all in, wholehearted prophet

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Yesterday, in Luke 21-22, we looked at what it means to give everything we have and go all in, wholeheartedly with God. Ezekiel strikes me as the sort of prophet God knew was all in and ready to do things that, let's say, you or I might think twice about.

His visions are some of the strangest things in the whole Bible. His clarity of detail on heavenly machinery makes me wonder if Ezekiel might have been some sort of multi-gifted genius of art and engineering like Leonardo da Vinci. Combine that with wholehearted dedication and obedience to God and we can expect the Spirit to draw incredible things through his life. So, what would God use him for?

It's a critical time for Israel. They have suffered the disgraceful fall into exile from their promised home with God. The short couple of years that most prophets said to wait before expecting restoration had passed. Maybe Jeremiah was right, then. Could it really be generations before life would go back to normal? Why wouldn't God fix this sooner?

Ezekiel's message - that people were still rebellious, hardened, obstinate, unwilling to listen to prophets because they were unwilling to listen to God – would not be feel-good, popular and easy to believe. So Ezekiel looks to me like a special measure from God, someone whose obedient dedication would both grab attention and make people wonder: is he for real?

I notice how Ezekiel was strengthened by eating God's words, just as we are by remembering Jesus' wholehearted giving of himself through communion. God has an involving, multi-sensory experience to share through Ezekiel too. He has to rely on God completely for any of this to work. People would soon find their attention grabbed more by their own hunger and need for help from God, but in Ezekiel they would find an authentic, wholehearted messenger showing what had gone wrong, what they needed next and how to turn back to God.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Whatever limits we think there are on what God can do, we had better forget them. With people who are open to him and willing to dedicate themselves to wholehearted response, God reveals aspects of his character and ability which are simply mind blowing. But God's purpose in doing this is for people to engage with him, listen and change where necessary.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This reminds me of a need to be wholeheartedly committed to God, and also of the power in showing, rather than telling. Sometimes I'm happiest to talk about God rather than show people what this means in my life or, much better, let God show what he can do directly - this requires a big leap of faith. So I am going to pray for opportunities to show people more of what God is about, and entrust more of my life with him as a necessary response.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I follow Jesus with and, hopefully, people God draws me into sharing with too!

Friday August 28: Ezekiel 5-8

The end! The end has come!

Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

Surprise! I was expecting to spend another couple of weeks with Ezekiel, but chapter 7 is clearly “the end” (it says, five times.) But what is it the end of?

Thankfully, it’s not the end of the world – we’re still here – and we know it’s not the end of Israel either. But it did look a lot like the end of a road that God’s people had been on since the time of Moses, freed from Egyptian slavery to journey into God-centred life in a promised land flowing with milk and honey.

The national identity was so firmly founded in remembering this journey, celebrating every year the Passover which set them free. So to lose that freedom, even for a while, would be linked to fear of far more than discomfort for a time. It must have felt catastrophic.

Why was this happening? God was not stopping being his people’s father. But it was time for family discipline after centuries of warnings. This wasn’t just a breach of religious rules but the growth of arrogance, violence, all kinds of crime we’ve read in other stories, trust in wealth rather than God, and pride that they didn’t need to change. God wanted Israel to show other nations that God-centred life was better and more just. Israel did not have that reputation and people may well have asked where their God is and what difference he makes.

This is what had to end: life which appeared God-centred but was not. God would deal with this assertively, taking responsibility for the forced disruption. God was not withdrawing but moving heaven and earth as forcefully as he did when he freed this family from Egypt.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

It would be fair to call this a low point in the history of God's people. However, it did not just show how angry God could be and what he could do when he had a point to prove. It also demonstrated that God was serious about his people's quality of life, and would not let violence, injustice and corruption continue.

Thinking about how this applies to us today, I think we must recognise that good life in God's Kingdom is coming, and some aspects of it are already here, but there is a lot to be done in its fulfilment which will involve massive change and an end to the world as we know it.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I love that we are covered by grace in relationship with Jesus, but I can’t help noticing how God feels here about people who were blessed by him but whose lives didn’t seem different to others. How much more should our lives be remarkable with God’s Spirit in us? I want to be conscious and deliberate about renewing my trust in Jesus to lead me and my family towards distinctively good lives centred around him. We need to pray about how this goes.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family, where I’ve discussed with my son today about loving people when they don’t seem loving to us, but we haven’t yet asked God directly together for the strength to do this.

Monday August 31: Ezekiel 9-12

When God is moving, don't get too comfy. Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

While there is a lot of horrible detail about death and judgement here, I'm most struck by the two major forces pushing against each other: God is moving, and people are resisting.

God is moving against his people's refusal to follow his ways, resulting in injustice, suffering and arrogance when challenged. The Passover-like picture in chapter 9 is a shocking reversal of fortune for people who trusted they were saved by their ancestors' movement from slavery to freedom, led by Moses in Exodus. There was a big difference between Israel then and now. Under Moses, at least one person listened to God and everyone else followed. In Ezekiel's time, people were stuck in their own ways, refusing to recognise the problems they were causing or the direction God had given them to change.

When people said, "This city is a pot, and we are the meat in it," they were comforting themselves that they were the best bits of Israel, which is why they thought they had not been poured out to be exiled. Despite movement all around them, including the departure of God's glory from the temple, their faith and security were in their traditions, stability and property. They were so conservatively minded and keen to keep what they cherished, they had no idea that God was opposed to them, telling them to change, and about to force them.

I love how God didn't just say this with words but used willing, obedient Ezekiel to show them pictures of what to expect. He was no longer tied down but packed and ready to move, bringing the Exodus to mind again for anyone who would connect the dots. Ezekiel would not part the sea but dig through a wall with his hands like a desperate prisoner escaping. Unlike the Exodus, God was not providing a route for the righteous oppressed but forcing the unrighteous to run for their lives.

It sounds like a scary and dark reversal of the love and light we might expect from God, but there is a purpose and hope for people who will be moved by him. The exiles share a promise from God of return and renewal, not as they are but with new hearts and spirit. So, this isn't just a picture of judgement but a story of redemption for anyone who will move with God.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God does not change, but he knows that we need to. He knows the state of our hearts, how ready they are for us to learn from him and get better at living and loving well. He knows whether we are sensitive enough to respond to a gentle nudge or hardened enough to need something more dramatic to grab our attention. Thankfully, Jesus promised his Spirit in us which can keep us tuned to his guidance, but he wants us to obey and not ignore it.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I feel the challenge from this. In a nice comfy place, it's easy to feel spiritually complacent when God may want me/us to move. I think this applies to our biggest assumptions about traditions to defend as well as everyday decisions about love, generosity and service. What changes does God want to lead us into concerning how we treat people? I want to be led by him on this, so I need to spend more time asking, listening and obeying when he moves.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family and other people I follow Jesus with.

Tuesday September 1: Ezekiel 13-15

Get real with God

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

Yesterday we looked at God's words to Ezekiel about getting on the move, which God was doing because people could not stay as they were. Today I'm reminded that even if we know that God is moving, and we are ready to follow his lead, it's vital to know what is really from God and not from our own imaginations. If we don't, we'll only get even more lost.

At this time in Israel's history, God was clear to the few prophets who would truly listen to him that many other people appeared to be prophets but would only "follow their own spirit." They were saying comforting words they and others wanted to hear, like "Peace", when there is no peace." They would give a splendid coating of whitewash to a wall which needed structural rather than cosmetic work, and so their deception would lead to destruction.

God's answer to this: get real! It would be painful to strip away the layers of false comfort, but important to see God for who he is. How else could people get past the self-deception of idolatry and start to accept strengthening from the real God who could help them to love?

I'm struck by how bits of this passage seem to come up again in Jesus' words as he shows the reality of God in the flesh to follow. From Jesus' time to ours and beyond, there would still be false prophets and God would still need to take down our structures to build new ones. This isn't just about literal buildings, I think, but our false assumptions, bad practices and rotten attempts to please God with religion and tradition we think we understand but don't.

Most of all, I'm struck by the contrast of fruitful life as Jesus offers in a living vine (John 15) instead of the useless thing described in Ezekiel 15. It's true, vines are pretty rubbish as wood, even for fires. So why would Israel aspire to keep, grow and be vines? Why are they a Jewish symbol carved into the temple then and woven into fabrics today? It's because of their fruit, which needs to be grown with skill and patience to make decent wine. God isn't telling Ezekiel that vines are rubbish but that his people are unfruitful, not in terms of numbers of people but quality of life. God would need to do some gardening to fix that.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

I'm reminded of how active God is in his creation, not just speaking through a few prophets but looking to grow spiritual fruit in everyone. Jesus spells this out more clearly, describing his father as the gardener in John 15, and Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. This work by God involves us engaging with the reality of his pruning so we can grow back stronger and more fruitful. God does not want us to settle for fake spirituality; it won't make real fruit!

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I want to engage more with prophecy and let God use me for real in this when he wants to, but I will let him grow and train me for this in his way. I'll look out for when he wants this! To be ready for this, I need to spend more time listening and reflecting on what he wants.

Who am I going to share this with?

I have some tricky conversations coming up that I'd love God to speak through. I pray he will!

Thursday September 3: Ezekiel 16-17

Our relationship with God means everything

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

Have you ever seen a reflection of yourself from an unflattering angle and hoped you didn't really look like that? This heaven's eye view of Jerusalem is a lot worse than unflattering. It's damning, appalling, difficult to read even when we know it's about someone else. I can only imagine that most people at the time rejected seeing themselves like this. But it certainly would have grabbed their attention.

Under the garish details of prostitution and promiscuity, what point is God making? I think it's about a breakdown in people's most important relationship, with life-damaging effects. God gave these people life, growth, splendid things and the perfection of beauty itself. But instead of enjoying and making the most of these in relationship with God, people revalued them as things to give away in pursuit of different relationships. Instead of being satisfied with God, they sought satisfaction from the embrace of other gods, cultures with conflicting moral standards and ultimately "detestable practices" including child sacrifice to win idols' favour.

This is a harsh picture, but it's for a messed up culture. Would gentle words have cut through?

One outstanding detail I notice is the comparison with Sodom. I think the original audience for these words would have known the story of God's destruction of Sodom, and it's a memorable story for us today. But do we remember it for the right reasons? I think maybe not, if we associate God's damnation with homosexual sex, giving "sodomy" its modern meaning. God spells out the sin deserving his condemnation in verses 49 and 50 here. They were "arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen." The story in Genesis 18 and 19 is clear that Sodom was an outrageously bad place before attempted mass rape became the last thing before executing judgement.

Both the story of Sodom and God's words through Ezekiel here might seem to be all about sex, but that is just what is grabbing our attention. God says the real issue is our values or concerns and what we do about them. The key relationship which changes this is with him. Outside of relationship with God, history and experience show that we live selfishly, even shamefully. But in relationship with God, we would share God's concerns, see life, ourselves and others more the way he does, and be empowered for a much better, more loving life.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God knows how to grab our attention! He also wants us to know who we are, given value and love by him and able to find the best possible life in relationship with him. God has seen how easily we forget this and intervened in many ways to bring us back, ultimately through Jesus.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm reminded of the difference between believing in God as an idea and growing the life changing relationship he wants. I'll spend more time talking and listening to God this week.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family and other people I pray with, and I'm hoping for work-related opportunities to share faith soon too. I'm praying I can share well about a relationship more than religion.

Friday September 4: Ezekiel 18-20

Repent and live!

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

There are some big downs and ups in these words from God through Ezekiel, and it's such a large-scale national exercise of judgement and correction, it would be easy to think that some people might be unfairly swept along with the rest. Is that how God treats people?

I love the proverb at the start of chapter 18 showing how closely people thought their experiences were shared within families or across generations more widely: "The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." That's an impressive family bond! It's also a convenient excuse for blaming one's own misfortune on someone else's poor choices.

While disaster seems to be affecting everyone who is forced to move, starving or battling to live, I love that God offers hope, firstly here to the individual who breaks the chain of bad examples leading to bad behaviour in their own life. That gives everyone the chance to change their minds ('repent') and live. God promises "a new heart and a new spirit" when people do. Does that sound familiar, like what we are seeing fulfilled around people following Jesus, either in person or (as we're finding in Acts) responding to other followers' calling?

I wish I knew how many people found that new heart and spirit at the time of Ezekiel. God's subsequent pictures of the national woe don't suggest this was a time of celebration. We saw earlier that God was looking for people who would lament Israel's fall, and God provides poetic imagery to share that sad picture. As heart crushing as it sounds, I can imagine the youngest people in the country finding at least a bit of comfort that their world is not just scary, rotten and failing. They come from strength and fruitfulness in their family history. Without knowing that, how could they have hope for restoration?

I also love that God promises that renewal will follow, after mapping out again the story of why life would be disrupted for considerable time. When God talks about rebellion, and everyone seems to think this is someone else's fault, I find it scary to think that from God's point of view, he really is referring to just about everybody, even (perhaps especially) the people who think they are morally the best compared with others. Pride, like idols, gets between us and God. But I love that God still promises a way back and restoration to come.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God keeps working to bring people back to himself. He expects a standard of life and fruitfulness when people are reconciled to him, and for people in Ezekiel's time that seems best measured by following laws. For us following Jesus, we can thank God for receiving his promised new heart and spirit already. These can guide us into wanting what God wants.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I will continue to spend more time talking and listening to God as I want to improve my understanding of what his heart and spirit want in everyday life. This guides what I do!

Who am I going to share this with?

I'm thankful that a work-related chance to share faith and practical love did come up today. I'm praying that God will continue to work there as well as in other conversations soon.

Monday September 7: Ezekiel 21-23

We might never want correction, but when do we need it?

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

Happy Monday, everyone! Did you have fun reading this? I know I didn't.

Imagine all we know about God is in this passage. Let's say we have no sense of the bigger journey, the love and grace God gives to bless people and the hope still offered in painful times. Maybe we've never heard of the huge, life-changing relief of a promised saviour ahead. Would this God be someone you might be interested in spending time with?

I'm going to guess not, but maybe you could be persuaded, especially by the middle of chapter 22. God has clearly seen a lot of injustice among his people. Most, if not all, of this would be stuff you would agree was wrong, as long as correcting it was about fixing other people's faults.

So I think that's part of the problem when we read about God's judgement. We'd like to see it, but can't bear to face it or accept that we should. Do we want the world to be better for poor people? Yes! Will we accept responsibility for profiting from them and extorting unjust gain from our neighbours? That's much harder. Aren't we doing the right thing when get on with business and try our best not to hurt others? That depends. How can we know?

I don't think we can take in what God wants without the bigger picture, so we can know and share his aims and find hope and the ability to change. We still might not want to be corrected, because being told we're wrong or forced to do something differently is always painful. This passage isn't here to get us to warm to the idea of God's judgement. But if we overlook it, we might miss some of the urgency God wants us to carry of a need to change.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants people to live good quality lives, measurable not through personal feelings as much as what happens in the ways we treat each other. When this is going badly, God needs to correct us. In Israel's case, there was a massive national correction through exile and later renewal. God gave Israel as a light to the world so, learning from this example, we can probably conclude that God wants us to live more justly too, and to ask for his help in this.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm struck by two strongly opposing attitudes in politics at the moment. On one hand, major progressive movements are emerging, pushing for change to fix injustices and make our behaviour more considerate and sustainable. On the other, many conservatives (including leaders in the UK and US) resist accepting a need for rethinking and correction.

I lean towards progressive, but I want more wisdom from God so that I'm not judging who to support based on stuff I want, but learning what kind of changes God wants. I pray for my wants to become aligned with what God wants! But I accept that he needs to correct me too.

Who am I going to share this with?

Seems like time to check in with friends in Extinction Rebellion and see what meaningful things we can do at school to affirm that Black Lives Matter. Praying with believers is key, and I want to pray that we can find real change through Jesus rather than human struggle alone.

Tuesday September 8: Ezekiel 24-27

This time, it's personal

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

It's another day when "like" seems to be the wrong word. I'm struck by God's comprehensive discipline of his people, not trying to correct a few errors on the fringe of what they do but striking at the heart of who they are.

Remember the saying, from chapter 11, that Israel used to say to itself, "This city is a pot and we are the meat in it"? People took pride in being great, the tender best bits of a stew, and protected by their container. In chapter 24, God takes that image and reinterprets it for their new, dire situation. The pot is actually impure, "encrusted" with corrosion which would ruin any decent stew. So instead the meat would be cooked on the fire, burned to the bone. As it turns out, Jerusalem's walls would cease to protect its people, and many would perish in the flames of battle. Why? God calls it a cleansing. "Your impurity is lewdness" and the action against it will be destructive.

A turning point is coming, but not a nice one, and there is an astonishing twist. This is the bit which knocks me over – God expects Ezekiel to respond obediently when death comes for his wife. And he does. It's not even as if he just has to get on with his job while mourning, but God tells him not to mourn. What sort of sign is this, and how does Ezekiel find the strength for it? This is the heart of this horror. I need to come back to it in a minute.

First, let's look at what happens next. The turning point is sadly not one which leads people back into hope and reconciliation. Instead, God's judgement moves out to neighbours taking pride or pleasure in Jerusalem's fall. These are localised, personalised, highly uncomfortable prophecies. The longest is for Jerusalem's long-time frenemy Tyre, a proud and famous trading city, supplier of cedar and skilled workers for Solomon's temple, but also the royal family which gave Jezebel into Israel's line of rulers, along with Baal worship and the infamous battle of the prophets in Elijah's time.

Jerusalem and Tyre had history. They probably had strong trading relationships but rivalry too. Tyre must have loved the opportunity to thrive with Jerusalem "broken" but didn't know that God would bring destruction to them too. It would be historic and memorable. But why?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

I see two things here which reveal God's character. One is a fire of justice. God wants our world and lives to be pure, not ruined by sin, greed, bloodshed, all the injustice we looked at yesterday. This doesn't just apply to one chosen family but the whole world, including us.

But this business with Ezekiel's wife – what is that? There is no justice in her death. It's suffering for God's anointed "son of man" who gets his direction and strength from God. This is like Jesus' suffering, caused by sin, shared by God who is personal among us, not remote.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Remember how seriously God takes sin and be more thankful for Jesus' way to fix this.

Who am I going to share this with?

Other people I follow Jesus with.

Thursday September 10: Ezekiel 28-31

There's no substitute for the real thing

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

It's never pleasant to hear about God's judgement, but now that it has turned out from the Jewish people in Ezekiel's time to their neighbours, I'm appreciating the bigger picture of what keeps getting between people and God.

On the surface, it might seem strange that God is dishing out punishments to other nations. Wasn't it only his people who made and broke a covenant agreement with him? Israel and Judah are getting the promised results of their choices, which their ancestors agreed would be fair and right. So, what has this got to do with Tyre, the proud trading city, or the legendary civilisation of Egypt?

God identifies their common fault. In the way they have treated creation and seen their own role in it, they have cast themselves as gods. God's accusation of Tyre is direct, and he identifies the cause: "Because of your wealth your heart has grown proud." By doing well materially, they have assumed they are doing well spiritually, with piles of gold assuring them that they must be successful and wise. Why would they then need God when they are gods?

Egypt's substitution of God might have been a little different, but just as foolish. By claiming dominion over creation, such as "The Nile belongs to me; I made it for myself," Egypt's Pharaoh put himself in God's place. Remember from the Exodus story how Egypt had magicians to reproduce many of God's miracles? They had gone their own way, spiritually, but were very much treading on God's turf by claiming ownership of his stuff.

So, these nations would find that despite their actively ignoring him, God would not ignore them but act to show the world that being God is something only God can do.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God can intervene to show people that he is real even if they do not believe in him. Without a framework of faith in God, this intervention might only seem disruptive, even destructive. But God's larger purpose is for everyone to know that it's better to know and trust him than for us to fool ourselves that we don't need him because we can do all that he does by ourselves.

God's intervention with other nations at the time of Ezekiel shows that his kingdom plan was never restricted to nurturing one nation. From the beginning of scripture, the case is made that he is God of the whole world, and he has been working to bring all people back to him.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I need to resist and reject the temptation to think that I am self-reliant because of some physical comfort, wealth, knowledge and wisdom. While these can all be good things, and God doesn't tell us to give them all up to express faith in him, they are only truly meaningful when we acknowledge God as their source, keep relying on him and stay prepared to let anything else go when God leads us through changes of situation, fortune or understanding.

Who am I going to share this with?

As we discuss plans for this term at church, I'm aware of tension between what I think I know and what I'm sure God can surprise us with. I'll reflect with the team as we look for his lead.

Friday September 11: Ezekiel 32-34

Only talking the talk is toxic

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

This is a smackdown from God which starts with Egypt but moves uncomfortably close to home. But I'm grateful that, by the end of this passage, God provides a way forward.

Egypt's fall is painful because it's from the height of believing themselves to be godlike to the depths of death in the least special grave available. When I picture the most famous things about Egypt, a lot of them get referenced here in chapter 32. The Great Sphinx of Giza is a mythical lion with a human head, built about 2000 years before Ezekiel, a wonder which still draws people today. Most likely it was made to inspire worship of gods, leaders, effectively themselves. It is also a place of honour, along with the pyramids, for rulers who cast themselves as gods to be commemorated forever.

God's response? "Are you more favoured than others? Go down and be laid among the uncircumcised." In other words, those with the highest position outside God's covenant had a lower position than anyone in it. The finest monuments and talk about being godlike are no substitute for knowing and obeying God.

In chapter 33, I'm struck by the practical responsibility God gives to Ezekiel not just to spend time listening and talking to God but to act on what he hears, warning people when needed. If I thought his visions were uncomfortable, imagine passing them on to someone who doesn't want to know or change!

It turns out that a lot of people were listening to Ezekiel though, and this is where things feel most uncomfortable for me. People who get together to hear the latest message from God, listening, saying good things about it, speaking of love, but then not putting change into practice. Is that me in the crowd there? It feels like it can be. Ouch.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Thankfully, God doesn't just speak and expect us all to move on our own. Chapter 34 is about shepherding and sounds a lot like following Jesus. God knows we need a good shepherd. We also have shepherd responsibilities but too often take care of ourselves ahead of others. But God is determined to save people from bad shepherds.

God's promise to gather and shepherd his people sounds remarkable in this context of correction and exile in Ezekiel's time. God is looking over a bigger timescale, back and forwards at the same time in Ezekiel 34:23 – "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them". Who lives in this past/present/future all-at-once space? The same person who said, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). That's right: Jesus, the good shepherd. God is revealing here his plan to save us all from just talking the talk.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

If I'm in that crowd of listeners who are not doing what God says, I need to get out and follow Jesus into whatever he's leading us into next.

Who am I going to share this with?

This is an interesting, busy, challenging time of change. I'll share this with others at church.

Monday September 14: Ezekiel 35-37

Why father God would move heaven and earth

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Either mountains have busier social lives than we knew, or God's prophecies to Mount Seir and the mountains of Israel are about more than mountains. I think people in Ezekiel's time saw the highest points in their landscapes as the places to get closest to God, but what happened at places like Mount Ararat, where the ark landed, and Mount Sinai, where Moses received the law, affected everybody. So when God speaks to the mountains, he's addressing the whole of his creation, including the parts that people struggle to reach, let alone change.

I love God's lofty sovereign pronouncements, then, that he will direct history rather than let it be run by rebellion and sin. Some people would like to think that Israel and Judah are ruined because of the exile, but God needs them to know that he is moving things the way he wants to. His plan is to create a movement leading back to him.

I'm struck by the numerous references God makes to this being "not for your sake... but for the sake of my holy name". Coming from a person, that would sound like self-boosting insecurity or pride. What does it mean from God? The problem he identifies is that people have been saying "These are the Lord's people, and yet they had to leave his land." Can you feel the tension there? If God were only concerned about cleanliness, he could have cleared his land and let go of his people. If God only wanted his people to be happy, he could have let them do whatever they wanted. It's not about the stuff God wants, but who God is.

Can you see God here being a father, and a good one? It's in his nature to love his children, prioritising health over happiness sometimes, moving for change and discipline where necessary so they grow up well. People may have thought God had thrown his kids out, not just from the home but the family. I think God wants people to know that, whatever the kids have done, he is not that kind of father, never has been, never will be.

There is a lot we don't know about ourselves and the world around us. I love that Ezekiel has the sense to answer God's question about the bones with, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know." It turns out that our father God can do some pretty cool, weird, incredible stuff with his creation. This includes showing how he can breathe life into dry, hopeless situations and join fractured things back together again. Maybe we can figure out how that works, maybe not, but if we can know and trust our father God to lead and move us, isn't that enough?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God reveals his motivation to move heaven and earth like this in his vision of one nation – it's togetherness. "They will be my people, and I will be their God." This is a loving father, who won't stop being one even if there is trouble, and is already planning the family reunion.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Thank God more for being a father, not just doing stuff, and learn more about being a father from him.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family, including my son!

Tuesday September 15: Ezekiel 38-40

God knows the future when he moves us

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

What's so scary about change? We know that sometimes it works out all the better for us. But we can probably think of times when it hasn't. Change brings uncertainty, and that can paralyse us with fear when we prefer to stick with what we know.

But imagine change guided by someone who knows the future. Would that be as scary? If we could somehow follow a path laid down by someone who knew everything ahead, if we could trust them, if they really knew things we could only guess: would we go with them?

I love the way God sets out Israel's future here. He knows it! He isn't just talking the talk of a visionary, idealistic person. He actually knows not just the way he would like things to go, but the way they will work out, including who will try and disrupt their way of life.

That's unfortunate for the land of Magog who will, "in future years," invade a recovered, restored, peaceful Israel, believing its people to be "unsuspecting... without walls and without gates and bars." Is this a warning so Israel can prepare their weapons for an ambush?

No – and this is where it gets even more amazing! God promises that in this future invasion, he will make the land itself fight back, backed up by all the forces of nature. Poor Magog doesn't stand a chance, and all Israel will have to do is "go out and use the weapons for fuel", which will last them years, plus a bit of clearing away the dead bodies.

That is quite the reassurance that things will work out if they trust God. Given that, would you?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants his people to know that he knows them and their past, present and future. This is a unique thing about God we will naturally struggle to get our heads around. But if we can believe it, and that he has our best interests in mind when he guides us, a little faith will go a long way.

God's plans for his people lead up to restoration of life with him. One sign of that for Israel was a restored temple, mapped out in detail in a vision God chose to show only to Ezekiel.

God chooses not to reveal every bit of the future to everybody but entrusts certain things to people he knows can handle them faithfully. A prophet like Ezekiel was known by God to be observant and obedient. If we want God to tell us things which will guide our future, we have to be just as faithful, not solely focused on ourselves and willing to accept whatever God says.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I want to get better at hearing and faithfully passing on words from God, which might be about the past, present or future. I need to trust and rely on God more to grow both my sensitivity to hear him and my resilience to pass on his words lovingly and faithfully.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family and other people I follow Jesus with.

Thursday September 17: Ezekiel 41-44

God is moving towards restoration

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

So you've thought about moving. Are you serious? Moving is a massive hassle, packing your life into boxes, trying to decide what moves and what gets thrown away, a zillion stressful things to sort out at once, and that's all before the massive challenge of rearranging into a new space, in a new place, different neighbours, different shops, different life.

Sure, it's easy to talk about moving. Fun to imagine it. If we could just magically transport ourselves somewhere nicer, that would be amazing. But the hassle, the practicalities...

At least this can give you a clue if you're considering moving, maybe with a partner. If it's all chatter about how amazing it could be, you're still a long way off. If they're looking at estate agents and school websites, mapping the commute on Google and asking about churches on forums, maybe it's looking serious. You're starting to visualise this new life, running it through your mind. And if your partner hands you a list of precise dimensions for the carpets and curtains, you'd better start getting ready to go!

Isn't this what God is doing here? Can you see how serious he is about moving everyone back in together? We've come a long way with Ezekiel from the downfall of God's people, through the trauma of rebellion and exile, the mind-changing reflections on life and relationships from God's point of view, and now into the hope of restoration to come. Finally that hope takes on some physical shape. We can see a life with God, with priests who can approach him directly and with God's recognisable, glorious presence flooding back to wash away guilt and pain.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants us to know that life with him is not just an idea in our heads but a practical reality. He is serious about restoring people into his presence – Israel then through regulated worship, us now and more to come, we pray, through life in Jesus.

God also uses physical pictures to describe mysterious things. It turns out that no-one has ever built this temple exactly. We don't know if it might get constructed in the future, or whether it's enough to stand in our minds as a symbol of restored relationships, order and holiness. If that's the case, it still makes a point that God needs us to listen to him and live his way, not just drag the idea and symbols of him along as accessories in life lived our own way. God is serious about moving towards restored relationships. Will we accept the disruption of packing away our old lives and moving too?

What am I going to do differently as a result?

We still have stuff in boxes from the last time we packed and moved over a decade ago! There's a bunch of stuff to go through and give or throw away, not to mention lots of clearing our son's outgrown toys and clothes. Next time I'm on a sorting batch, I want to approach it more prayerfully, giving God the chance to speak about things – beyond the stuff – he wants me to hold onto or let go of. In whatever ways he wants us to move, we'll be more ready!

Who am I going to share this with?

My family.

Friday September 18: Ezekiel 45-48

When God moves, everything can be transformed

Today Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

I love how Ezekiel's vision of restoration gets bigger and bigger. Yesterday's passage was all about the fine details of the symbols of worship, centred around a small altar, surrounded by not-huge buildings and courtyards. But here we see this is to be set in a sacred plot of land over 100 square kilometres. What God starts in a small space can affect a huge area.

If you read the end of the Bible, in Revelation, you will find a description of a city which echoes this, showing where God's kingdom movement is heading – bigger. Much bigger! The prophet in Revelation 21 marks New Jerusalem as bigger than Europe, over 2,000 kilometres long and wide and... high! (That's 5 times higher than the International Space Station!)

My favourite bit in Ezekiel might be the picture of the river flowing from the temple, initially ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep, then too deep! And with this fresh water comes life, transforming the Dead Sea where it enters, bringing "swarms of living creatures" wherever it flows. Along the side, incredible fruit trees which are always in season, bringing everlasting supplies of food and healing. God's movement is not an inward-looking one, simply requiring loyalty to God, but an outward-flowing one, promising blessing for the world.

The take-home message? In a world where most societies had many, many gods, don't think that this unusual movement around one God was small or only involved a few people for a "religion" part of their lives. Don't imagine that it could be contained in small places of worship at special times, or kept in one group, tribe or nation. When God moves, he can break through any barrier we have, changing us and transforming the world.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God does not think small! He showed Ezekiel snapshots of his kingdom work across a stretch of time, and this was amazing enough. When we connect it with the rest of the Bible, we can see God's whole-of-life plans to transform us, and whole-of-history plan to renew and restore the world. The scale of the big picture with God can be dizzying, hard to take in.

But I think I can see a constant theme which is part of how God works. He starts with little things and grows them. Just as humanity grew from a small number, and a nation of faith grew from one man's family, God's world-changing work has a source we can grasp. We believe and follow one man, Jesus, and his Spirit comes to live in our hearts, making us "temples" (1 Corinthians 6). What the Spirit does in us flows out like life-bringing water, just as it did from the temple Ezekiel saw.

God might never show us visions like Ezekiel's, and we may never see all the effects of the life and love God wants to pour through us into our relationships, families, workplaces and communities. But God only needs us to love him, trust and obey him, and let him flow.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Thank God that his big plans involve love and new life for us, and commit to go with his flow.

Who am I going to share this with?

There are people I know outside church who need refreshment right now, so with them.