

## 05. Ezekiel 33-37

The call to repentance. Oracles of salvation



## Ezekiel 33:1-6. The Mission of the prophet

The word of YHWH came to me: Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one of their number as their **sentinel** (see 3:17-20); and if the sentinel sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the horn and warns the people; then if any who hear the sound of the horn do not take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads ... If they had taken warning, they would have saved their lives. But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel's hand.

## Ezekiel 33:10-11

Now you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?” Say to them, As I live, says the Lord YHWH, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

The dreadful experience of the siege of Jerusalem and its devastation at the hands of the Babylonian army, as well as the experience of being in exile, could leave the exiles with a feeling of despair: ‘how can we live?’ YHWH declares on oath and in unusually passionate language, that he takes no pleasure in the death of those who have been unfaithful. His only desire is that they repent and live.

## Ezekiel 33:12

Son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress; nor will the wicked fall because of their wickedness when they turn from their wickedness.

Verse 12 underlines the truth that what matters is what people decide to do now. The fact that they have been righteous in the past is not something that guarantees life. They must continue to choose what is right. In the same way the fact that they have been unfaithful in the past does not exclude them from life. They can live if they choose now to change their ways. No one is excluded from YHWH's desire that we live.

## Ezekiel 33:20

O house of Israel, I will judge all of you according to your ways!

## Ezekiel 33:21-22

In the eleventh year of our exile (587BC), in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, someone who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, “The city has fallen.”

Now the hand of YHWH had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; but he had opened my mouth by the time the fugitive came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer unable to speak.

This news vindicates Ezekiel’s dire warnings. People are more likely to listen to him now, and the fall of Jerusalem opens up a new phase of his ministry – a phase in which he no longer needs to warn of punishment (that has happened), but is inspired to speak of YHWH’s desire to forgive. As we have just seen in the previous verses, YHWH does not want to punish. He wants to forgive. The call, therefore, is to repent and so enjoy the life that YHWH is offering his people.

## Ezekiel 34:1-6

The word of YHWH came to me: Son of man, prophesy against the **shepherds of Israel**: prophesy, and say to them – to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. **My sheep** were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

## Ezekiel 34:7-10

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of YHWH: As I live, says the Lord YHWH, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep;

therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of YHWH: Thus says the Lord YHWH, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.



## Ezekiel 34:11-15

For thus says the Lord YHWH: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord YHWH.



## Ezekiel 34:16

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with **justice**.

## Ezekiel 34:17-19

As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord YHWH: I shall judge between animal and animal. To the rams and he-goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

## Ezekiel 34:20-24

Therefore, thus says the Lord YHWH to them: I myself will judge between the fat animals and the lean ones. 21Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, YHWH, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, YHWH, have spoken.

Behind this 'Messianic' promise lies the guarantee given to David in 2Samuel 7:12-17 that his dynasty would last forever – a guarantee that was especially important in post-exilic Judah (see Zechariah 3:8; 6:12; compare Jeremiah 30:9).

## Ezekiel 34:25-31

I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am YHWH, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. They shall know that I, YHWH their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord YHWH.

## Ezekiel 35 Another oracle against Edom

The oracle against Edom which was included in the section on the oracles against the nations (see 25:12-14) was directly related to the gloating of Edom over the destruction of Jerusalem in 587.

Here we have a later oracle that reflects on Edom's part in the violence against Judah. It was during the exile that Edom occupied land just to the south of Judah.

The oracle is included here to provide the context for the promise of salvation to Israel that we find in the early part of chapter 36.

Verses 10-15 make it clear that the exiles have heard that Edom is encroaching on YHWH's land, the land of the 'two nations' (Judah and Israel). There is no way that they will not go unpunished for this.

## Ezekiel 36:1-5

And you, son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel, and say: O mountains of Israel, hear the word of YHWH. Thus says the Lord YHWH: Because the enemy said of you, “Aha!” and, “The ancient heights have become our possession,” therefore prophesy, and say: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Because they made you desolate indeed, and crushed you from all sides, so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations, and you became an object of gossip and slander among the people; therefore, O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord YHWH: Thus says the Lord YHWH to the mountains and the hills, the watercourses and the valleys, the desolate wastes and the deserted towns, which have become a source of plunder and an object of derision to the rest of the nations all around; therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: I am speaking in my hot jealousy against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom.

## Ezekiel 36:5-7

I am speaking in my hot jealousy against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, who, with wholehearted joy and utter contempt, took my land as their possession, because of its pasture, to plunder it. Therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel, and say to the mountains and hills, to the watercourses and valleys, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am speaking in my jealous wrath, because you have suffered the insults of the nations; therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: I swear that the nations that are all around you shall themselves suffer insults.

## Ezekiel 36:8-12

But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel; for they shall soon come home. See now, I am for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown; and I will multiply your population, the whole house of Israel, all of it; the towns shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt; and I will multiply human beings and animals upon you. They shall increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am YHWH. I will lead people upon you — my people Israel — and they shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance. Never again will you make them childless.



## Ezekiel 36:13-15

Thus says the Lord YHWH: Because they say to you, “You devour people, and so have made your people childless,” therefore you shall no longer devour people and never again make childless your people, says the Lord YHWH; and no longer will I let you hear the insults of the nations, no longer shall you bear the disgrace of the peoples; and no longer shall you cause your nation to stumble, says the Lord YHWH.

The catastrophe that overwhelmed Judah in the 6th century was the result of the people's failure to observe the covenant.

Jeremiah came to the conclusion that the problem of Israel's constant failure was that the people were simply incapable of obeying: "Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil"(Jeremiah 13:23).

Ezekiel came to the same conclusion. YHWH addressed him as follows: "I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn" (Ezekiel 2:3-4).

Jeremiah saw the need for a new covenant: “The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says YHWH. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says YHWH: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know YHWH,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says YHWH; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

“I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me” (Jeremiah 32:40).

Ezekiel, too, focuses on a covenant that YHWH will make with his people: “I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant ... I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am YHWH” (Ezekiel 16:60, 62).

“I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forever more” (Ezekiel 37:26; see 34:25).

In the closing years of the exile we find the same theme from the Isaiah School: “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says YHWH, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).

“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David” (Isaiah 55:3).

If this covenant is to last (see Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26), YHWH will have to offer a special grace. Jeremiah speaks of ‘writing the covenant the law on their hearts’(31:33). Ezekiel’s words follow.

## Ezekiel 36:25-28

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you will live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you will be my people, and I will be your God.

YHWH's first action is to purify the people from past sin. Our 'spirit' (breath) is something breathed into us by God. We depend on God to renew our breath. If God does not, we die. 'Spirit', therefore, speaks of our life-communion with God. YHWH's second action is to breathe life into us in a new way. This is accompanied by 'a new heart'(compare Ezekiel 11:19-20; 18:31). The word 'heart' refers to the depths of a person's consciousness, including our thoughts, our higher emotions and our decisions.

Spirit and heart are closely connected:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me ... The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:10, 17).

“YHWH is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).



Deuteronomy and Baruch also speak of God's action on the human heart:

“Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul, and so will live” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

“Until today, Yahweh has not given you a heart to understand.”

(Deuteronomy 29:3).

“I will give them a heart that will listen” (Baruch 2:31).

“In the country of their exile they will take all this to heart, and acknowledge that I am YHWH, their God. I will give them a heart, and an attentive ear” (Baruch 2:30).

## Ezekiel 36:29-32

I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds.

It is not because of you that I will act, says the Lord YHWH; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

## Ezekiel 36:33-36

Thus says the Lord YHWH: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. The land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. 35 And they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.” Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, YHWH, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, YHWH, have spoken, and I will do it.

‘I am YHWH who says of Jerusalem, “It shall be inhabited,” and of the cities of Judah, “They shall be rebuilt, and I will raise up their ruins” ... who says of Jerusalem, “It shall be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid” (Isaiah 44:26, 28).

## Ezekiel 37:1-6

The hand of YHWH came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of YHWH and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord YHWH, you know.”

Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O **dry bones**, hear the word of YHWH. Thus says the Lord YHWH to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am YHWH.”

## Ezekiel 37:7-10

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was **no breath** in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

I prophesied as he commanded me, and the **breath** came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

## Ezekiel 37:11-14

Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am going to open your **graves**, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am YHWH, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, YHWH, have spoken and will act,” says YHWH.

## Ezekiel 37:15-19

The word of YHWH came to me: Son of man, take a stick and write on it, “For Judah, and the Israelites associated with it”; then take another stick and write on it, “For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it”; and join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand. And when your people say to you, “Will you not show us what you mean by these?” say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am about to take the stick of Joseph (which is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with it; and I will put the stick of Judah upon it, and make them one stick, in order that they may be one in my hand.

Jeremiah also speaks of reunification 3:18; 30:3; 31:6.



## Ezekiel 37:20-24

When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd.

## Ezekiel 37: 24-28

They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I YHWH sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.