**Lesson 1 The Call Chapters 1-3**

**Read Ezekiel 1:1-28.**

**In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month.**  The opening three chapters serve as the introduction to the book of Ezekiel and present the main characters in the work: the Lord God, Ezekiel the prophet, and the rebellious people of Israel to whom Ezekiel is being sent. The opening verses identify the person, the time, and the place where Ezekiel’s visions occurred. God acts in history: his word breaks into human events and influences their outcome. Ezekiel is situated right among the exiles … in the land of the †Chaldeans (that is, the Babylonians). [[1]](#footnote-1)

This prophetic event is captured in two complementary ways: by *seeing* and by *hearing*. **The heavens were opened** and Ezekiel **saw visions of God**. By spiritual sight Ezekiel sees visions that come from above, from God. But in addition, **the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel** (see Jer 1:2; Hosea 1:1 for parallels). He hears the voice of God. This provides the pattern for the rest of the book: revelation comes to Ezekiel through both seeing and hearing.

We know that Ezekiel is a prophet of God, but in this opening section he is identified also as a priest. This is important for what follows: Ezekiel’s concern for the temple and the priestly worship of God is a crucial aspect of his message. Throughout the book he places a notable emphasis on priestly purity among the people of God.

Finally, we are told that **the hand of the LORD** **was upon him there**, a phrase that appears seven times in the book. Not only did God’s *word* come to Ezekiel but the Lord’s *hand* pressed heavily upon him. This metaphor indicates that Ezekiel is a man held firmly by God’s hand and under his authority.

**Going Deeper – Interesting Similarities in Ezekiel**

Some of the Church Fathers see a similarity between Ezekiel’s opening vision and the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Origen of Alexandria (d. 254) speaks of Ezekiel as “a type of Christ” for the following reasons: both men are thirty years old when they begin their ministries, both experience a vision by a river, and both see the heavens opened and hear the word of the Lord. St. Jerome (d. 420) adds the descent of the Spirit on both figures: just as the Spirit comes upon Ezekiel to enable him to fulfill his prophetic mission (Ezek 2:2), so the Spirit descends upon Jesus for the fulfillment of his messianic call.

There are also important parallels between Ezekiel’s opening vision and the book of Revelation. In Revelation, John is praying on the Lord’s Day, and suddenly a door opens into heaven and he is called to come up and see (1:10; 4:1). Like Ezekiel, John receives this revelation through both what he sees and what he hears. Both Ezekiel and John then proceed to convey in visions a series of severe judgments followed by a picture of a new temple and a new creation in which God will dwell with his people forever. John follows closely in the footsteps of Ezekiel and brings Ezekiel’s message to its completion in Christ. (**Ibid.**)

**1:5.The likeness of four living creatures.** Ezekiel’s description of these living creatures comes in parts, each description building on the previous one. Each living creature is in the form of men, literally “a human likeness” (Hebrew *demut ’adam*), recalling the making of “Adam” in the image and “likeness” of God (Gen 1:26). But strikingly, each living creature also has four faces: a human face in front, a lion’s face on the right, an ox’s face on the left, and an eagle’s face behind. (**Ibid**. p. 37)

**Going Deeper - The Four Faces of the Living Creatures**

Beginning with St. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 200), the four faces of the living creatures were applied to Jesus’s own life as presented in the four Gospels. Each Gospel was identified with one of the four faces, though the Fathers differed on which Gospel was paired with which face. St. Jerome’s view became the standard account: Matthew was paired with the human face, Mark with the lion, Luke with the ox, and John with the eagle. Pope Gregory the Great eloquently describes how the four “faces” describe the complementary qualities of Christ as revealed in the four Gospels:

For the Only-Begotten Son of God himself truly became man; he deigned to die like an ox at sacrifice for our salvation; he, through the virtue of his fortitude, rose as a lion. … Furthermore, ascending to heaven after his resurrection, he was borne aloft to the heights like an eagle. He is therefore wholly within us at the same time, who became a man in being born, an ox in dying, a lion in rising again, and an eagle in ascending to the heavens. (**Ibid**. p. 38)

**1:15. Now as I looked at the living creatures.** The “wheels” (vv. 15–21) suggest a war chariot, but they have extraordinary features and operate as if they were alive: they are “full of eyes” (v. 18) and “the spirit of the living creatures was in (them)” (v. 20). They symbolize all inanimate creation—a dimension of creation which, like man, is designed to reveal the greatness of the glory of God[[2]](#footnote-2)

**1:28. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face.** Ezekiel’s opening vision is intended to reveal the power and reality of God in a striking, unmistakable way. This follows a pattern of visions given to various figures throughout the Old Testament: to Jacob (Gen 28), to Moses (Exodus 34), to Isaiah (Isa 6), to Daniel (Dan 7), and to many others. Likewise, in the New Testament the experience of visions continues: to Peter (Acts 10), to Paul (2 Cor 12), to Stephen (Acts 7), and to John (Rev 1). Now contained within the canonical Scriptures, these visions have become part of the inspired revelation of God to the world.

**Going Deeper – Some Insight into Visions**

The tradition of the Church also attests to visions given to many of the saints. But do visions continue today, and if so, how should we think about them? God does grant people visions today, and some of them receive official recognition from the Church (for example, the visions given to St. Faustina on God’s mercy). But it is essential to grasp the purpose of these visions. They do not add to the deposit of faith, to what the Church calls “public revelation.” Instead, visions are “private revelations” that are given in a particular time in order to awaken us to the reality of God and to equip us to respond with insight and faith to the challenges of the day. “It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history” (Catechism 67). When God chooses to impart visions to his people, we should welcome them: they sharpen our sense of God’s presence and awaken us to the way he is calling us to act in the world. (**Ibid**. Keating p. 41)

**Read Ezekiel 2:1-9**

**2:1-2. Son of man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you.**  For the first time in the book the Lord speaks, summoning Ezekiel to stand up before him and listen: **Son of man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you**. This is also the first appearance of the phrase “son of man,” the most common title by which the Lord addresses Ezekiel. Along with the spoken word, the Spirit comes to Ezekiel: **And when he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet**. This is the *Spirit of God* acting upon Ezekiel to strengthen him inwardly so that he can bear up under the difficult word about to be spoken. This is also a kind of preparation for the great vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37), when the Spirit of the Lord will come upon Ezekiel once again to proclaim a time of restoration. (**Ibid**. Keating p.44)

**Going Deeper - Son of Man**

The phrase “son of man” (Hebrew ben-’adam) appears 93 times in Ezekiel (in 38 of 48 chapters), while occurring just 14 times in the rest of the Old Testament. In several of those instances “son of man” is placed in parallel with “man” (’adam), showing that the meaning is something like “mortal human being,” one who is descended from Adam, made from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7; 3:19). Examples occur throughout the Old Testament. From the Law (the Torah): “God is not man, that he should lie, / or a son of man, that he should repent” (Num 23:19). From the Prophets: “Blessed is the man who does this, / and the son of man who holds it fast” (Isa 56:2). From the Psalms: “What is man that you are mindful of him, / and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:4). And from the Wisdom literature: “Behold, even the moon is not bright / and the stars are not clean in his sight; / how much less man, who is a maggot, / and the son of man, who is a worm” (Job 25:5–6). The exception to this meaning is found in Daniel, where “son of man” refers to a humanlike figure who possesses divine qualities and who sits at the right hand of God in heaven: “And behold, with the clouds of heaven / there came one like a son of man, / and he came to the Ancient of Days / and was presented before him” (Dan 7:13).

Jesus frequently refers to himself as “the son of man” in each of the four Gospels. Both meanings of “son of man” apply to him: Jesus is truly a man, a human being, descended from Adam, but he is also the glorious “son of man” who sits at the right hand of God and will come in glory with the clouds of heaven (see Mark 14:62). (**Ibid**. p. 45)

**Read Ezekiel 3:1-10; 16-21; 22-27**

**3:1-3**. **Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll**. Ezekiel is not free to pick and choose the words he will speak. He must eat the entire scroll and ingest all the words that are found in it. And crucially, Ezekiel obeys: this is the act of faith and obedience that the Lord is seeking. **So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat**. But Ezekiel must do more than just take the scroll into his mouth. The Lord tells him: **eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it**. Ezekiel must receive the word deeply into himself, into his inner parts, so that he can speak this word with power. In a striking way, Ezekiel will be called to embody the word that he receives and speaks.

Surprisingly, Ezekiel discovers that the scroll is **sweet as honey** in his mouth. How can words of mourning and woe be sweet to the taste? Despite the content of the scroll, concerned with coming judgment, the word is still sweet, because it is *God’s* word. The word of God is “sweet” and good even when the content of the message is “sour.” Ezekiel’s older contemporary, Jeremiah, also “ate” the words of God and found them a delight to his heart: “Your words were found, and I ate them, / and your words became to me a joy / and the delight of my heart” (Jer 15:16). (**Ibid**. pp. 44-45)

**Going Deeper – New Testament Occurrences of Eating the Word**

Ezekiel’s eating of the scroll finds its direct fulfillment in the book of Revelation (10:8–11). There John is told to take the scroll from the hand of an angel and “eat” the scroll: “Take it and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth” (v. 9). Just as Ezekiel eats the scroll of God’s judgment and finds it sweet in his mouth (but bitter in his stomach), so does John, who now “must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings” (v. 11).

But there is another reference to a scroll that appears earlier in the book of Revelation (5:1–9). This scroll, like Ezekiel’s, has words written on the front and back and contains predictions of great judgments to come. But it also has the promise of God’s full redemption of the world and of a new creation. Confronted with the words of this scroll, John weeps because no one has been found worthy to open it and bring about its fulfillment. But John is told, “Weep not; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (v. 5). Jesus Christ, risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father, is now Lord. He has the authority to take the scroll of God’s providential judgments and glorious promises and carry its purposes to completion. **(Ibid** p. 46)

**Going Even Deeper – How Do We Respond**

Fr Keating offers this insight: “This section of Ezekiel presents us with a clear contrast of characters. On the one side are the people of Israel: they have hard foreheads and stubborn hearts and refuse to receive God’s word. On the other side is Ezekiel himself: he receives God’s Spirit and is pliant before God’s word, ready to “swallow” God’s word deep into his heart. Centuries later the angel Gabriel came to a young woman, announcing God’s momentous plan of redemption (Luke 1:26–33). Like Ezekiel, Mary was docile and receptive to God’s word. She took that spoken word into her heart, thus enabling the Holy Spirit to overshadow her and bring forth in an utterly unprecedented way the Word of God from her womb. We stand in a similar situation: God’s word also comes to us fresh and new. We can be ‘hardened by the deceitfulness of sin’ (Heb 3:13) and refuse to respond, or we can be receptive to God’s word through faith and obedience. In the prophet Ezekiel, and preeminently in the Virgin Mary, we have the pattern to follow, the path to adhere to. Obedience to God’s word does not free us from difficulty and suffering, but it places us in the hands of God, who will strengthen us to endure and bear fruit through our faith-filled response to God’s word.” (**Ibid.** pp. 47-48)

**3:17. Son of Man I have made you a watchman**. A watchman was the person charged with protecting the people by warning them of any sudden attack (cf. 2 Sam 18:24; Ps 127:1). The prophet, as a watchman (cf. Is 21:6; Hos 9:8; Habakkuk 2:1), must keep guard and warn his hearers of impending danger (cf. Is 52:8; 56:10; Jer 6:17). If they fail to listen, it will be their own fault; but if the prophet keeps quiet, or delivers the wrong message, then he will be to blame for what happens.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The call to be a watchman, given here at the start of Ezekiel’s ministry, will appear again as the †oracles of judgment reach their climax (33:1–9). These two watchman passages function like bookends for Ezekiel’s ministry: everything in between (chaps. 4–32) is the catalogue of the words of warning that Ezekiel courageously speaks to a sinful people. This is a solemn responsibility. Ezekiel cannot determine whether people will turn away from their sin and rebellion, but he is responsible now to speak a word of warning to individuals and to the entire nation of Israel.

**Going Deeper – Being a Watchman**

The biblical prophets are the exemplars of what a watchman must be, and we hold them in great admiration for their sacrificial service. In our own day, each of us can probably identify certain people who are fulfilling this role: hearing God’s voice, discerning the times and seasons, and speaking that word broadly in a public setting.

But what about the rest of us who are not called to a public ministry as Ezekiel was? Are we not called to hear God’s word and then speak that word in our own settings and circumstances? Each of us, in our own way, is invited to hear and discern God’s voice, and to speak what we hear to those around us: to those in our families, in our workplaces, in our schools. This does not mean that we are responsible to point out everyone’s faults and failings! We need to discern when to speak and how we are to speak. But we may have a word of exhortation or warning that could prevent or rescue someone from stumbling and falling. The apostle Peter calls *all* the faithful to be “good stewards of God’s varied †grace” and encourages the one who speaks to do so “as one who utters oracles of God” (1 Pet 4:10–11). This is not just for the great prophets in Ezekiel’s day and ours. By the power of the Holy Spirit, each of us can hear and speak the “oracles of God” and so bring God’s life-giving word to those around us. (**Ibid.** Keating pp. 50-53)

**3:22. Arise, go forth into the plain.**  The scene that closes the account of the call of Ezekiel repeats some of its main features. First, the fact that the initiative comes entirely from the Lord: “the hand of the Lord was there upon me” (v. 22: cf. 1:3). Then, the theophany, “like the glory which I had seen by the river Chebar” (v. 23). This reference to his first vision of the glory (cf. 1:1, 3) will be repeated when the temple is profaned (cf. 10:12) and on the more significant occasion of the restoration (cf. 43:3). The third element is the very clear order from God to stay at home and stay silent (vv. 24–26); although this may have seemed a strange instruction at the time, it requires the prophet to have solidarity with his people, for he, like them, must suffer isolation, slavery and silence.

Early commentators, reading the text literally, interpreted this instruction as signifying that Ezekiel had some physical or mental ailment; but nowadays all commentators see the episode as meaning that the prophet identifies with the deportees (who sought to lie low as long as Jerusalem and the temple were still standing), and that he is prepared to speak out only what the Lord wants him to say and when he wants him to do so. In fact, he will speak out again when the “fugitive” comes to him to confirm that Jerusalem has been destroyed (24:27; 33:22). This command certainly did not oblige Ezekiel never to speak a word, for in the chapters that follow we find many oracles by him. However, he only spoke within his house, where many of the exiles, particularly the elders, would go to listen to him (cf. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1, 3).

“I will make your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth” (v. 26): a similar graphic phrase is found in Psalm 137:6; here it emphasizes that the prophet’s dumbness is a further affliction, in addition to the adversity that he was already experiencing as an exile in Babylon; he is called to speak but won’t be able to. (**Ibid.** Scepter pp. 611-612)

1. Keating, D. A. (2024). [*Ezekiel*](https://ref.ly/logosres/cathcommezek?ref=Bible.Eze1.1-3&off=708&ctx=d%2c+785%2c+904%E2%80%937%0a1%3a1%E2%80%933%0a~The+opening+verses+i) (M. Healy, M. Giszczak, & P. S. Williamson, Eds.; pp. 33–34). Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gavigan, J., McCarthy, B., & McGovern, T., eds. (2005). [*Major Prophets*](https://ref.ly/logosres/navarreotstandard23major?ref=BibleRSVCE.Eze1.4-28&off=3644&ctx=rophetam%2c+1%2c+4%2c+1).%0a~The+%E2%80%9Cwheels%E2%80%9D+(vv.+15) (p. 602). Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gavigan, J., McCarthy, B., & McGovern, T., eds. (2005). [*Major Prophets*](https://ref.ly/logosres/navarreotstandard23major?ref=BibleRSVCE.Eze3.16-21&off=99&ctx=of+Israel%E2%80%9D+(v.+17).+~A+watchman+was+the+p) (pp. 609–610). Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)