

# as good as it gets

## A simple guide to Preaching through Ezekiel

Ezekiel is one of those old testament books that just seems too hard to handle. But it's not as tough as you think, says  
**BRYSON SMITH.**

Why crash numbers didn't add up  
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"London: Just about everybody must have this fantasy: You survive a horrendous accident. Everybody assumes you're dead, so you slip away to the airport, hop aboard the next plane to some distant place and start a whole new life."

"Evidently a number of people lived out that very scenario two weeks ago in the confusion and turmoil following the fiery collision of two crowded commuter trains just outside London's Paddington Station."

"Scotland Yard says some survivors of the accident walked away without a word to anyone and boarded international flights later that day."

"Those disappearing passengers were one of the main reasons why police were so far off in estimating the number of casualties in

Israel a life that is as good as it can possibly be. A life of security, intimacy, enjoyment and harmony. It's in this respect that Ezekiel so clearly points the way for the arrival of Jesus Christ.

### Setting & Structure

Ezekiel was one of the first prisoners taken by Babylon during the horror of the Exile. The book therefore occurs at a time of unprecedented despair in the life of Israel. It is this despair which dominates the first half of the book. As Ezekiel sits in Babylon, hearing reports of the Babylonian juggernaut rolling across the countryside towards Jerusalem his prophecies are full of gloom and judgment as Yahweh explains the spiritual reasons behind the military tragedy.

What makes Ezekiel so interesting however, is the way in which the historical events at the time of Ezekiel are so closely interwoven with the theme of his message and therefore the structure of the book. This is notably seen in the way that the tone of the book changes radically at several key points, all of which correspond to significant events within the Exile. For example after 23 chapters of judgment oracles against Israel Ezekiel hears word that Zion has been surrounded (Ezekiel 24:1-2). At this point there is a sudden change in subject matter. Judgment is still the dominant theme but now Israel is dropped from being the centre of attention. Now God's judgment is described upon all the nations.

God's judgment on the nations continues until Ezekiel again hears news of Jerusalem. This time the news is even worse. The siege which started in Ezekiel 24 has finally broken the back of the city. Zion is now overrun with Babylonian troops (Ezekiel 33:21-22). At this point the book again sharply changes tone. The nations are forgotten and once more the focus swings back to Israel. Yet now the mood is different. Ironically, despite the gloom of Zion falling, God now delivers messages of hope. It is this theme which will now dominate the remainder of the book as

Ezekiel is all about God promising his people a new life... a life that's as good as it can possibly be. That's how Ezekiel so clearly points the way for the arrival of Jesus Christ.

the October 5 Paddington disaster. Just after the crash Scotland Yard said that the death toll was likely to climb to 70 and possibly well over 100. But as time passed and more passengers who were presumed dead turned up alive and well, the estimates fell sharply."

"Many phantom victims had walked away from the crash and set off for foreign destinations without a word to anyone."

It's amazing what some people will do so as to get a fresh start at things. The lengths that many will go to in order to have the chance of a whole new life. It's this yearning within so many of us that makes Ezekiel such an exhilarating book of the Old Testament.

Ezekiel is all about God promising his people a new life. The book opens at a dark time of despair and hopelessness but it describes a future bright with joy and fulfilment. Through the words of his prophet, Yahweh commits himself to giving

Yahweh piles promise upon promise regarding future blessings for his people.

The end result of this interplay between historical event and theological theme is that the book of Ezekiel has a very clear and profound structure. This is a great help in preaching. Indeed the diagram of the book's structure included on the next page, was used as an overhead during the sermon. The diagram was progressively revealed throughout the series as we covered the relevant material. This had the benefit of helping people keep track of the development of ideas in what is a very long and seemingly complicated book.

God & Jesus.

At its most obvious, Ezekiel shows us the justice and mercy of God. The first half of the book, which is dominated by oracles of judgment, reveals that God's sense of justice demands for sin be punished. Alternatively the second half of the book, which is dominated by oracles of hope, reveals that God is immensely gracious and generous. God's love has a hair-trigger.

However it is Ezekiel's opening vision which prepares the way for God's justice and mercy to be taken to a whole new level within the book. On the banks of the Kebar River, Ezekiel sees a God who knows everything and who goes everywhere. It is these characteristics of God which transform his justice and mercy to both terrifying and thrilling proportions.

The fact that God knows everything and goes everywhere means that his judgment are inescapable. No sin is secret. Everything is uncovered. The plight of the sinner before God is therefore pitiful. Be it Israel or the nations, no one can stand before the thoroughness of God's scrutiny. Alternatively, the fact that God knows everything and goes everywhere, means that his mercy is wonderfully liberating. God's grace is not jeopardised by him discovering something new about us. There is nothing new for him to discover. Furthermore, no one can give blessings to match those of God's. There is nothing good that we need which God is ignorant of. Life under God's love really is life as good as it possibly could be.

It's not too hard to now see how Ezekiel points us so unambiguously to Jesus. Certainly Jesus comes as the specific fulfilment of certain promises made in the book. For example Jesus is the good

shepherd promised in Ezekiel 34 (cf John 10). But even more than these specific examples of promise-fulfilment, Jesus is the one who comes to ultimately satisfy the all encompassing dimensions of God's justice and love.

Preaching it

Because Ezekiel is such a large book there are a multitude of ways to preach through it. The crucial issue however, is to help people see the main flow and development of ideas within the book and how they point us to Jesus. To help achieve that, a 48 week series doing one chapter a week is probably not the best way forward. In the end I choose the following breakup of the book.

Ezekiel : a preaching plan

talk 1

EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE, EVERY STEP YOU TAKE

Ezekiel 1-3

God knows and sees everything. Bad news for Israel but good news for the Christian; all our sins are dealt with by Christ.

talk 2

WHEN GOD SAYS GOODBYE

Ezekiel 3-23

God treats sin very seriously and it grieves him immensely when we are flippant about it.

talk 3

JUSTICE FOR ALL

Ezekiel 24-32

Nobody escapes the justice of God so nobody escapes the need for Christ.

talk 4

SHEPHERDS BEHAVING BADLY

Ezekiel 33-36

Jesus is the good shepherd who cares more for his sheep than himself.

talk 5

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

Ezekiel 37-39

God promises to take his people from death to life, from disunity to unity and from defeat to victory. This promise is kept in Christ.

talk 6

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

Ezekiel 40-48

After the exile God promises to return to his people in intimate, uninterrupted fellowship - a promise kept in Christ.

Resources

Bill Dumbrell's, Faith of Israel was a good read. He's got some nice observations about recurring motifs and images.

Craigie (DSB) & Block (WBC/Word) are the recommended commentaries but as usual they aren't that too good on the larger narrative analysis or the connections to Jesus. In the end you can't beat just reading the text in large slabs yourself.

Talk 1

EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE,

EVERY STEP YOU TAKE

Ezekiel 1-3

1.0 A STRANGE SIGHT IN AN UNEXPECTED PLACE

Larry Walters is a truck driver in the United States, who satisfied his passion to flyby tying 45 weather balloons to his lawn chair. Unfortunately things didn't quite go to plan. When Larry cut free the anchor he shot up to an altitude of 11,000 feet! Larry was finally rescued when he drifted into the approach corridor for Los Angeles International Airport and was spotted by a Pan Am pilot. Can you imagine the conversation between the Pan Am pilot and the LA airport tower? I would have love to have heard this pilot trying to convince air traffic control that he just flown past a guy on a banana lounge 3 km up! A very strange sight in a most unexpected place. Ezekiel also starts out with a very strange sight in a most unexpected place.

2.0 EZEKIEL 1-3

a) a strange sight

Its a weird vision. Eyes everywhere, because God sees everything. Wheels everywhere, because God can get to everything, creatures with lots of faces carrying the throne, because God is served by everything. It's a picture of a God from whom you cant hide.

b) an unexpected place

Ezekiel sees this vision of Yahweh the God of Israel, but he sees it in Babylon! Behind enemy lines! It reinforces the vision itself. The wings, the eyes, the wheels, the strangeness of the sight and the unexpected of the place, both say the same thing. God is the Lord of everything, and therefore he can do anything and go anywhere.

c) a pointless task

Ezekiel is called to preach to a people who probably won't listen. It reinforces the notion that you can't escape God's scrutiny. Even under punishment, Israel can't escape being told that they are being punished. God's presence through his word is relentless. All this is bad news for Israel, but for us, this side of the cross there's actually great comfort here.

### 3.0 THE COMFORT OF KNOWING THAT GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING

The truths that God sees everything and that he can go anywhere. That you can't get away from him. These are wonderful things about God, because they mean that you and I can have enormous confidence in the relationship we have with him in Christ.

You see in Christ we have been reconciled to God. Unlike Israel under God's judgment at the time of the exile. By the grace of God we are now his family. Jesus' death on the cross has done away with any barrier that our disobedience may have been between us and God. And the fullness with which God knows and sees everything, that only serves to highlight the completeness with which Jesus' death has dealt with our sin.

#### Talk 2

#### WHEN GOD SAYS GOODBYE

##### Ezekiel 3-23

###### 1.0 "I don't want to see you anymore"

"Go away. I don't want to see you anymore." They are terrible words. I know Christian parents who have had to say that to one of their children. A rebellious child who resisted every attempt at loving them. A child who delighted in causing trouble and difficulty within the family. So much so that for the sake of their own sanity and marriage, these gentle parents actually had to ask one of their own children to leave home. "Go away. We can't take it. We don't want to see you anymore." Having to say those words almost killed them. They're terrible words to be driven to say. They are words which speak of anguish and sleepless nights and inner torment. They are the words which God effectively says to Israel, over and over and over again throughout the 1st half of the book of Ezekiel.

###### 2.0 The message of Ezekiel 3-23

In one sense the first half of the book of Ezekiel is quite repetitive. All the way through it's God telling Israel over and over

that they are being beaten up by the Babylonians because of their rebelliousness and disobedience. One of the reasons this takes so many chapters is because God says it in lots of different ways. It's like those sporting replays on television, where you see the same thing over and over again but from slightly different angles. Rather than look at each replay however, ch 8 provides good central, summary chapter.

###### 3.0 The vision of Ezekiel 8-11

Ezekiel sees a vision in which he is taken on a guided tour of the Temple. Everywhere he goes, every room he enters, he sees the worship of false gods. It is as if a faithless marriage partner has actually had lovers in the different rooms of the family home. Israel have utterly, utterly betrayed Yahweh. Therefore two terrible things will now happen. Firstly, ch 9 tells of a bloody judgment that will fall. Secondly Ezekiel sees the cloud of the glory of God disappear from the Temple (11:23). God has gone. It really is the classic movie scene. The husband comes home from work early, discovers his wife making love with another man in their own bedroom. So he packs his bags and he walks out.

###### 4.0 The terribleness of sin

These are dark pages of the OT, all about God's stomach churning and agonising over Israel's sin. They are full of passion and disgust. Israel have torn God's heart out. These are chapters which vividly tell us how terrible sin is and what it does to God.

Do you understand that? Do you realise what our sin does to our heavenly father?

God thought sin so serious that he paid the ultimate sacrifice for it. He gave up his only Son to death because of sin. How can we be flippant and casual about something which God feels so strongly about. Ezekiel 3-23 tell us over and over and over again that sin is serious. So we ought to get serious about it.

#### Talk 3

#### JUSTICE FOR ALL

##### Ezekiel 24-32

###### 1.0 Feeling hot when you're cold

Hypothermia is a terrible way to die. At first a person in extreme cold has increasingly violent shivering. This leads into a profound weariness, a feeling of heaviness, a distorted sense of time and distance, increasing confusion happens, a tendency to make illogical and silly

decisions occurs. Gradually the sufferer becomes thoroughly disorientated, they start having hallucinations - including the last cruel misconceptions of all. In the final stages of hypothermia the victim becomes convinced that they aren't cold at all. They think that they're actually quite hot. And so many victims tear off their clothing and gloves or even crawl out of their sleeping bags. There are plenty of stories of hikers who have been found half naked lying in snowbanks just outside their tents. Because even though they had actually been freezing to death, they thought they were burning up. Such is the insidiousness of hypothermia.

A lot of people suffer from the insidiousness of spiritual hypothermia. A lot of people are actually so cold towards God that they suffer the delusion that their relationship with God is fine. They actually have this illogical notion that God thinks that they're OK, even though they hardly give God a second thought.

Ezekiel 24-32, offer a very grim warning against spiritual hypothermia. They warn us about being deluded about God, that no matter how good we might think we are it's actually not our opinion that matters most. It's God's opinion which carries the most weight.

###### 2.0 A turning point in Ezekiel 24

Ezekiel 24:1-2 is a turning point in Ezekiel. Jerusalem herself is now under siege. Ironically though, God's attention now turns away from Israel. It's as if God doesn't want the nations to grow smug at Israel's expense.

###### 3.0 The content of chapters 24-32

Seven nations in all are now addressed. Seven is often used in prophecies to symbolise completeness, fullness. This is God's judgment to the full world.

Chapter 27 is a good representative chapter. In it the great trading empire of Tyre is pictured as an impregnable ship, a magnificent vessel. But it's all a bit like the Titanic. Immediately the ship is taken out to sea she unceremoniously sinks. Why? Because of their pride (28:17).

###### 4.0 The lessons of chapters 24-32

a) no one can stand God's judgment...

There is no one who can stand up to the searching gaze of God's justice. Remember the opening vision? God sees and knows everything.

b) ...therefore everyone needs Christ.

You will not meet a person this week who doesn't need Jesus, whether its at work, or serving you at the shops or playing you in sport, or driving in the car in front of you, or eating breakfast at the table in front of you. No matter how nice they seem to be, we all need to hear about Jesus Christ. He is the one who rescues us from the predicament which Ezekiel so vividly portrayed.

#### Talk 4

#### SHEPHERDS BEHAVING BADLY

##### Ezekiel 33-36

##### 1.0 Marcos, Suharto & the rest

In 1988 the United States indicted Ferdinand Marcos and his wife for racketeering and embezzlement. A grand jury discovered that they received bribes, defrauded banks and milked their own country of approx 1.2 billion dollars. As bad as that was, the Marcos' pale into insignificance against President Suharto of Indonesia. According to a Time Magazine article in May 1999, when the end came for Suharto he had used his position to stash away an estimated \$15 billion! Indonesia has the 3rd largest population in the world and yet Suharto could still have afforded to give \$100 to every single one of its citizens. We have grown used to having leaders who are only in it for their personal self interest. It's what we expect. Exactly the same sort of thing was happening in Israel, when the prophet Ezekiel was around.

##### 2.0 Another turning point in Ezekiel

In Ezekiel 33:21-22 Ezekiel receives word that Jerusalem has fallen. Correspondingly the book again swings back to focus on Israel. But now the mood is different. It's not all doom and gloom anymore. Sure there's some. But it's as if the judgments have bottomed out, the tone lightens and messages of hope start to shine through the dark clouds.

##### 3.0 Bad shepherds (Ezk 34)

Israel's leaders have been hopeless at leading. They have left the people vulnerable and unprotected because of their eagerness to help themselves. Yet in amongst all this condemnation there is great hope(v11-16). God is coming to the rescue. God is going to give his people the leadership they've never had. As part of this God is going to appoint a new king over them. Someone like King David of old. A new leader who will have his subjects best

interests at heart.

##### 4.0 The good shepherd (John 10:11-18)

Jesus claims that He is the shepherd Israel has been waiting for, the one come to led God's people to a full life. And notice that little word "THE" good shepherd. There is no other. There has been no other. There will be no other. The reason for this exclusiveness is because of what Jesus actually does as the good shepherd. Three times Jesus refers to laying down his life. Jesus is not interesting in leading people for his own gratification, Jesus is interested in leading people so that they might have life and have it to the full.

##### 4.0 Jesus; is He your shepherd?

In Sept 1985 a party was held at one of the largest city pools in New Orleans. The reason for the party was that it had been the first summer in years that a drowning had not occurred at a New Orleans city pool. And so with the summer now officially finished, over 200 people, including over 100 certified lifeguards all got together to celebrate. It was a great party, except when it was over they noticed a fully clothed man lying on the bottom of the pool near the drain. They attempted to revive him but it was too late. The man had drowned surrounded by life guards, too busy celebrating their success to notice. That would never happen with Jesus. He is the Good shepherd who never stops looking out for us. He is never distracted from that. He is not your average leader.

Are there areas of your life we're you're holding out on a Jesus a bit? Don't be like that. Jesus doesn't say things to make his life easier, he tells us things so that we might have life and have it to the full.

#### Talk 5

#### A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

##### Ezekiel 37-39

##### 1.0 "Why crash victim numbers didn't add up"

The article from the SHM was read (see start p1 of this paper). Ezekiel 37-39 is also about people going through a disaster and coming out the other side of it in such a way as to get a fresh start. Only its not about phantom victims jumping overseas flights to try and rectify things! Its about God himself breaking in to rectifying things.

##### 2.0 A reversal of fortune for Israel

These chapters follow the good news of the last talk. God promises three big reversals which is He is going to bring to his people under the leadership of the new shepherd he promised in Ezekiel 34.

##### a) life instead of death (ch 37:1-14)

This is probably the most well known section of Ezekiel. Its graphic, its dramatic, its powerful; as God brings bleached and lifeless bones to life. Its a picture of Ezekiel speaking God's word to the exiles in Babylonian, a people who are dead in their sins, yet who will come to new life in God.

##### b) unified instead of divided (37:15ff)

God is planning a new unified people of his own. A people who used to be scattered and diverse but who are now gathered and unified.

##### c) security instead of vulnerability(37:24-28)

The everlasting covenant of peace mentioned here is more than peace with God, it's also peace and safety from enemies. This is vividly described in the next two chapters in which Gog & Magog symbolise the worst enemies you could imagine and yet they are crushed. So protected is Israel by God.

##### 3.0 Our reversal of fortune

All these reversals ultimately come true in Christ. The follower of Jesus also goes from death to life (Eph 2:4-5). The followers of Jesus also have entered into a unified people of God (Eph 3:13ff). The follower of Jesus has also gone from being at the mercy of the forces of evil to being secure and safe in the arms of our God (Rom 8:38-39).

##### 4.0 The centrality of Christ

If nothing else we can't help but see the centrality of Jesus Christ to the plans and purposes of God. And that should spur us on to make sure that Jesus Christ is also central to our plans and purposes. In his book "The True and Living God," Kim Hawtrey examines some of the things which can cause us to shift Jesus off centre stage. Things like children, friends, entertainment, convenience, popularity, clothes, food, technology, appliances, learning, alcohol, beauty, self fulfilment, acceptance. Many of those things are good, some are even noble, but they can all have the insidious effect of becoming too important to us. And so scattered through out his book Kim Hawtrey has some useful diagnostic question to help identify whether some of those things might have too tight a grip on

us. Questions like: Is my idea of relaxing at the end of each week, to go out and buy something? Am I so locked into credit repayments that I have nothing to spare for generosity to others? Could I go without TV for a month without severe withdrawal symptoms? Does my life revolve around career goals? Do I compare myself to others on the basis of personal appearance? Are my children more important to me than knowing God? Am I fascinated with romance and finding your perfect match?

## Talk 6

### LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

#### Ezekiel 40-48

##### 1.0 "Ain't no living in a perfect world"

Huey Lewis and the News once sung, "Ain't no living in a perfect world. There ain't no perfect world anyway. Ain't no living in a

perfect world." God reckons that Huey Lewis is wrong. In this final section of Ezekiel God says that there is a perfect world. There is a life yet to come which will be as good as it can be. Not a struggle, not a difficulty, not a worry. God describes this with images of previous good times in the OT.

##### 2.0 Let the good times roll

###### a) Temple

In Ezekiel 40-44, Ezekiel sees in a vision of a new temple. A temple perfect in every way. Its very elaborate and beautifully symmetrically. This building is perfect because of the now perfect relationship which exists between God and his people.

###### b) the garden of Eden

There are also some strong hints about the garden of Eden (47:7-9). A place of wonderful abundance, cleansed and

renewed through God's presence.

##### c) a division of the land.

In chapters 45 through to 48, all the different tribes of Israel are given certain allotments of land. For a Jew reading this, it takes them back to the good old days of Joshua when Israel were settling into the promised land for the first time and everyone was getting there own bit of real estate. Happy memories. But it's even better here! For they don't even have to fight for the land. There is no battle, conflict or struggle; the land is simply distributed. God's people are perfectly secure and so can enjoy their inheritance in peace and quiet.

##### 3.0 As good as it gets for Israel

In Ezekiel we have moved from the depth of hopelessness and despair to wonderful heights of hope and exhilaration (show

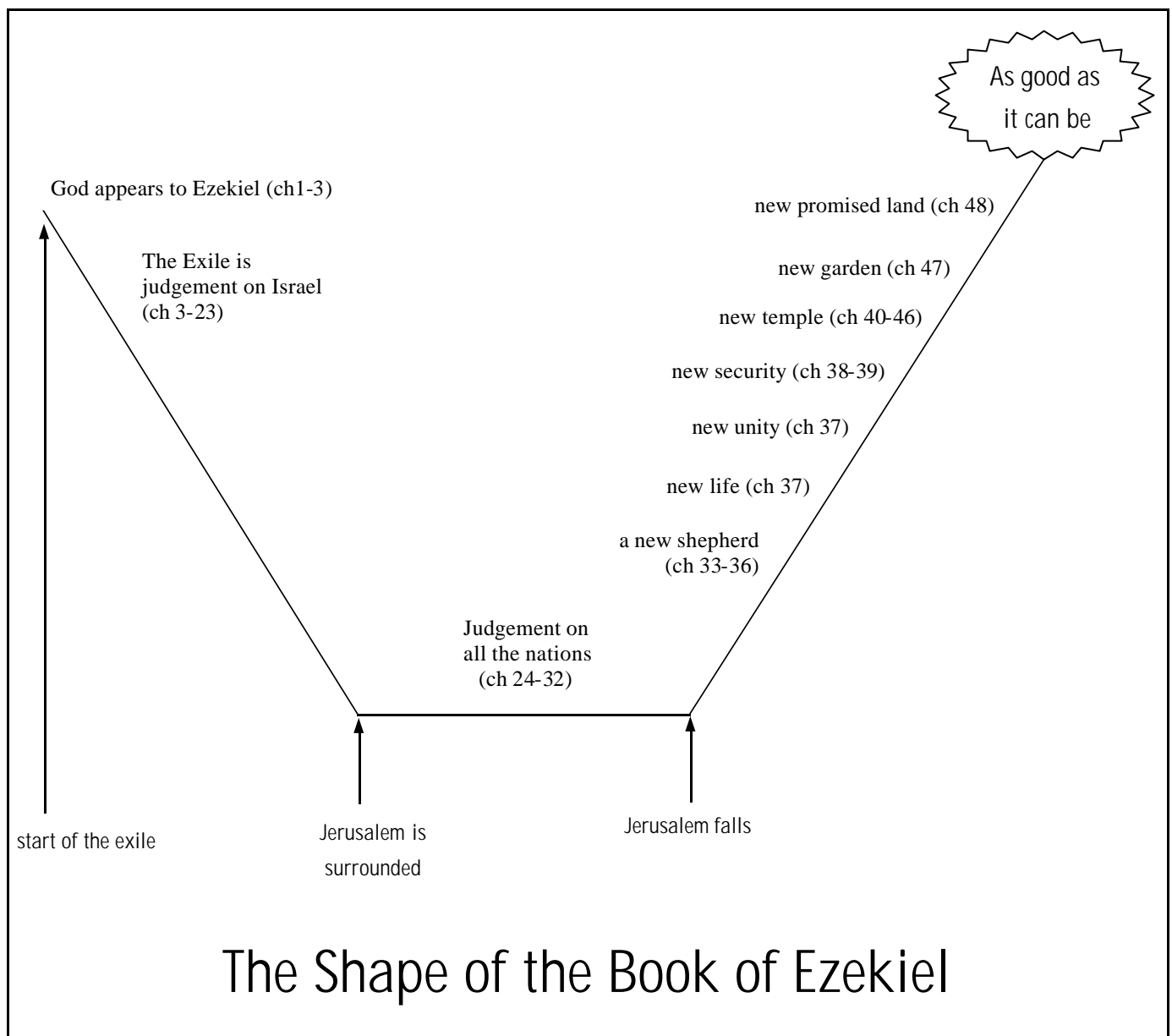


diagram). We started out with this seemingly out of control spin into sin and judgement. But then for no reason, apart from his mercy, God turned it around by piling blessings upon blessing.

#### 4.0 As good as it gets in Christ

All these blessings in Ezekiel have the effect of reminding us of the layers of blessings we accumulate in Christ, since it is Christ who fulfils them all. Prior to the civil war the master of a particular black slave died and, very unusually for the time, left the slave an inheritance of \$50,000. In those days it was an enormous sum. An astronomical figure. And so the bank manager called the slave into his office, carefully explained it all to him and then asked if there was anything else he could help with. To which the slave replied, "Please sir, do you think I could have 50c. I want to buy a sack of corn meal." The slave had no idea how rich he was. He just couldn't imagine or understand the extent of his wealth. It was beyond his comprehension. And so he was still worried about affording a bit of flour. We can be like that. In Christ we are so rich but so often we don't understand that. And it shows in the things we get upset over, the things we worry over, the things we pray about and the things we put our energy into here.