

Youth Teaching Resources

March 29, 2020



Lent / Easter / Pentecost—All Things New

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 —“A New Choice”

Genesis 12:1-4a—“A New Start”

Psalm 95—“A New Song”

1 Samuel 16:1-13—“A New King”

Ezekiel 37:1-14—“A New Life”

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A New Life

Ezekiel 37:1-14

YOUTH Teaching Guide

by Jeremy Colliver

This youth teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

PARENT PREP

Loneliness is hard. I think it is even harder now that everyone seems to be connected through their phones. The connectedness of the phones offers false promises: students can stay in touch, they know what each other is doing, they can check-in when they aren't there, but they can't experience community. When our students are lonely they need community. Their community might look different from yours, but help them understand where they can find true community.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Fellowship

Begin your session by showing the clip “Resurrection” from *The Iron Giant*. If you are unable to show the clip, summarize it to the best of your ability, and then facilitate a discussion using questions like the following:

- 1) Why was the kind ok with the only piece he had left of his friend leaving?
- 2) How did the pieces know where to go?
- 3) What was happening with the Iron Giant?
- 4) Have you ever had to let something go so that it could be made whole again? If so, what happened?
- 5) How does your faith influence the idea of old things being made new again? How does your faith influence your ideas about second chances?

Information

Transition to the next section of the session by reading Ezekiel 37.1-14. Allow the students to ask any initial questions they have about the text. As you answer their questions, you may want to provide some of the information found in Tony's commentary to answer their questions. When the students have had an opportunity to share their initial thoughts, continue the discussion by facilitating a discussion using questions like the following:

- 1) What was Ezekiel's role before the exile? How did this influence his standing with the people of Israel?
- 2) How was Ezekiel's understanding of how God viewed the people of Israel different than from the people themselves?
- 3) What is the valley of dry bones supposed to represent?
- 4) How did Ezekiel's sermon bring life back to the bones and to the people of Israel?
- 5) How was this sermon a prophecy of what was to come?
- 6) What does the story of Ezekiel mean to us today?

If your group would like to dig deeper in their discussion, share some of the insights that Tony provides in the "Digging Deeper" portion of his commentary. You may want to use some questions like the following to facilitate your discussion:

- 1) Who was Ezekiel?
- 2) What was the curse of dry bones?
- 3) What does "LORD God" represent?
- 4) What are the four winds of the Bible?

You may also want your group to discuss "The Hardest Question" if they would like to continue their discussion on this passage. Tony poses the following question to consider as "The Hardest Question": What was it like for the Israelites living in Babylon?

Transformation

During this season of Lent each session will conclude with a spiritual discipline that the students can use throughout the week. This week, lead your students through the spiritual discipline of *Silence*. If you have not led a group through this spiritual practice, familiarize yourself with the practice before leading the group. Once you have led the group through practice, allow the students time to share with the larger group what they experience.

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving for the life that God breathes into us on a daily basis?

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Who was Ezekiel?—The prophet Ezekiel became active during the earliest years of the exile, even before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Most of the classical prophets were outsiders who spoke truth to power, whether people, priests, or kings. Ezekiel, however, was part of the powerful priestly circle when the Babylonians captured him and other leading residents of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, deporting them to southern Babylon. Ezekiel and other Jews were assigned quarters in a town that came to be known as Tel-Abib, not far from the city of Nippur (3:15). The town was near the Chebar, a tributary or canal associated with the Euphrates River.

In the fifth year of his time in exile, or 593 (1:2), Ezekiel was overwhelmed by a vision from God that changed his life and set him on a course of prophetic activity for at least the next twenty-two years. Prophecies in the book named for Ezekiel are often precisely dated, with the last one being in the 27th year of his exile, or 571 BCE (29:7).

Ezekiel was unlike any other prophet. While most prophetic books were the work of disciples who described their teacher’s prophetic activity in a biographical form, Ezekiel’s words are written in the first person, as an autobiography. And, while the historical context of other prophets’ preaching must usually be deduced from the content of the prophecy itself, Ezekiel is often careful to include precise dates and historical notes describing the setting of his prophetic pronouncements.

But, this is not the most notable thing about Ezekiel: his words and actions undoubtedly led many of his hearers to regard him as a certified lunatic. Ezekiel was prone to fantastic visions that included everything from angelic visitors on flying disks (chapter 1) to a valley of dry bones that come to life (chapter 37). In addition, Ezekiel seems to have adopted certain outlandish behaviors for prophetic purpose, some of which seem physically impossible. In 4:1-15, for example, Ezekiel was instructed to lie on the ground on his left side for 390 days without getting up, then switch to his right side for 40 more days. For the duration, he was to point his finger at a model of Jerusalem under siege and prophesy against it while also grinding assorted grains to make his own bread, to be baked over a fire fueled by cow’s dung. Who said being a prophet was easy?

While some commentators have suggested that Ezekiel was mentally ill or neurotic at best, it is not necessary for us to assume that Ezekiel was a madman. As demonstrated by Isaiah, who reportedly went naked for three years to symbolize Israel’s future fall (Isa. 20:1-5), and by Jeremiah, who walked around wearing a wooden yoke (Jeremiah 27-28), extreme methods may be required to draw attention to one’s message.

Flying Saucers?—Erich von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods* (1984) and Josef Blumrich’s *The Spaceships of Ezekiel* (1973) are among several works claiming that Ezekiel’s vision of

Digging Deeper *continued*

God flying about in something that involved fiery wheels within wheels grew from a UFO sighting.

Dry bones—Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones may reflect curses that were typical of ancient treaties between a conquering king and vassal nations. Any who rebelled against the ruling king were to be cursed not only by death, but by having their bodies exposed to the elements rather than honorably buried. Assyrian kings like Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal often boasted of how they had defeated enemies and piled up their corpses, not allowing them to be buried. The dry bones could be seen as symbolic of Israel’s punishment for breaking the covenant with God (see Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel*, Smyth & Helwys Commentaries [Smyth & Helwys, 2005], 450, citing F. C. Fensham, “The Curse of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14 Changed to a Blessing of Resurrection,” *JNSL* 13 [1987]: 59–60).

Ancient Hebrews believed that all people went to a shadowy land called Sheol after death, but retained a tenuous contact with what remained of their bodies. Funerary inscriptions often warned potential grave robbers that they would be cursed if they disturbed the bones of the tomb’s inhabitants. The thought of one’s bones lying exposed to vultures and to the sun would have been exceedingly unpleasant.

Lord GOD—Attentive readers will note the unusual appearance of “Lord GOD,” when “LORD God” is far more common. The difference is this: translators use uppercase letters to indicate the divine name YHWH (possibly pronounced as “Yahweh”). The name commonly appears in combination with the word *Elohim*, a less personal name for God. “*Yahweh Elohim*,” then, would be translated as “LORD God.”

In a few instances, such as this one, the divine title *’Adonai Yahweh* appears. The term *’Adonai* is a generic word that means “lord.” It could be used of human masters or kings, as well as for the deity. To avoid redundancy, when the title *’Adonai Yahweh* appears in the text, we typically translate “Lord GOD” rather than “Lord LORD,” with the uppercase letters in GOD indicating the underlying name *Yahweh*.

Four winds—Ezekiel is not the only biblical writer to speak of the “four winds of heaven,” which also appear in Jer. 49:36 and Zech. 2:6, 6:5 as the agent of divine activity. The four winds are also mentioned in visionary sequences in Dan. 7:2, 8:8, and 11:4.

The primary image is not so much to portray four personified winds, but to indicate God’s power to call the wind/breath/spirit from the four points of the compass.

Life and breath—One of the psalmists also connected life, breath, and the presence of God. In Ps. 104:29-30, we read:

*When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.*

*When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.*

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

What was it like for Israelites living in Babylon?

Abundant biblical testimony points to the sorrow experienced by those who wept by the rivers of Babylon as they remembered the glories of Jerusalem (Ps. 137:1). The book of Lamentations and sections of the book of Jeremiah speak of weeping and mourning for the loss of the land.

Yet, books such as Daniel and Ezekiel, along with encouraging advice from Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29) indicate that the people were swiftly settled into Jewish communities and integrated into the economic and political life of the Babylonians.

Recently a cache of cuneiform documents reflecting Israelite life in Babylon has come to light. More than a hundred small clay tablets – probably looted from archaeological sites during the tumult in Iraq, though the owner disputes it – suggest that the Hebrews lived normal lives and conducted business as usual while in Babylon.

A translation of the documents appears in a book by Laurie Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch (*Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* [CUSAS 28: CDL Press, 2014]), and they are now on display in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem.

The tablets are written in Babylonian cuneiform, though some Hebrew letters appear in the margins, possibly for filing purposes. Since most of the tablets are legal documents, they contain dates, the earliest of which relates to the 15th year after the exile began.

The documents employ a number of Hebrew names, some of which include theophoric elements like “Yah” or “El” (e.g., Gedalyahu, Shaltiel, and Netanyahu). The River Chebar – named by Ezekiel as the locus for some of his oracles – is cited in several of the tablets.

The tablets reflect legal transactions among Hebrew exiles living in a block of settlements between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. One of the towns was called *Al Jahudu*, which pays tribute (in Babylonian spelling) to the homeland of Judah, and might even be translated as something like “Jewtown.”

The documents include lease agreements for houses and land, receipts for the trade or sale of livestock and slaves, and instructions regarding inheritances. Their mundane nature suggests that whether they liked it or not, the resettled Hebrews were very much a part of the larger social and political network in their new home. Taking Jeremiah’s advice to “build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce” (Jer. 29:5), they made the best of their situation.

The Hardest Question *continued*

