

## **BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON**

### **Prophet Ezekiel**

#### **PART THREE: Burnt Hair and Counting**

"The crowds keep growing every day now," Hazak said. He came early before his friend Buzi arrived, expecting to find them already here with his uncle.

"The crowds are very faithful in counting," Buzi adds, "At least I give them credit."

Hilkiah arrives, "What is the count now?" he asks, since the people have been counting the days that Ezekiel had been lying on his side...his right side to be exact.

"Three hundred and ninety days since yesterday," Buzi says. "So, today is three hundred and ninety-one!"

"Usually, we find him already lying down, but this time he came back from the village and then laid down right away," Hazak also added.

"He's lying on his left side," Hilkiah pointed out with excitement. The crowd heard him and those close by nodded in agreement.

"Your right," Hazak said. "Maybe he forgot?"

"No! My uncle told me before to just watch," Buzi said. "Some things do not need to be explained." He added, "Only time will tell."

"Something else is different too!" Hilkiah almost shouted. "He shaved his head and beard!"

"You have been gone too long," Hazak told him. "He shaved while you were away."

"Why?" Hilkiah asks.

"We don't know why," Hazak offers, "but we can tell you what he did with it...Buzi?" he nods to his friend to continue.

And Buziah continues, "After he shaved his head and beard, he divided his hair into three piles."

"Why?" Hilkiah asks confused.

"Some things do not need to be explained," Hazak repeated Ezekiel's admonition.

"Alright, what did he do with the piles of hair, then?" Hilkiah was getting excited again.

"The first one he chops up with a sword," Buzi dramatically acts out the chopping scene.

"And the second..." Hazak says jointing in the drama.

"He scatters into the wind," Buzi again dramatically throws his hand up into the wind pretending to scatter it.

"And the third..." Hazak says.

"He throws into the fire, sss..." Buzi makes a sizzling sound.

They notice some of the people are watching them with interest, especially those who may not have been at the enactment.

"But..." Hazak says.

"But, what?" Buzi asks, confused.

"He retrieves a few hairs and binds them up in the edges of his robes," Hazak finishes.

Some of the people clap. Ezekiel looks in their direction and rolls his eyes.

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Ezekiel's next piece of street theater involves lying on his side for an extended period—390 days on his right side and 40 days on his left side. If done in a public place, this act would have drawn a crowd as they counted out the days of Ezekiel's ordeal. His efforts in this case are designed to symbolize the number of years that the people of the northern and southern kingdoms, respectively, will remain in exile. This current exile can be interpreted as a new period of winnowing and transformation. It may also serve as a reminder to the people that even though they are once again sentenced to a period of 'wilderness' purification, that time of trial will come to an end.

In what could be described as yet another example of street theater, the prophet is told to shave his head and beard. At God's direction Ezekiel divides his hair into three piles. Then he chops up one pile with a sword, scatters another into the wind, and throws the third in the fire. He retrieves a few hairs and binds them up in the edges of his robes, signifying that only a few of the people, a remnant, will survive. While the act provides no hope for Jerusalem's immediate future, it does signal the hope that a few of the righteous will survive the destruction.

Like his prophetic predecessors Ezekiel sought to explain not only that disaster was coming, but why. What he says is that the Israelite people are and have been in the grip of an irrational apostasy. They have flagrantly and repeatedly violated the laws of their God. These violations are listed

with unsparing detail and fullness in 22:6-12. The level of behavior in Jerusalem has fallen below that of the surrounding nations, he declares in 5:5.

Ezekiel is unique among prophets in stressing that this bent toward apostasy was a characteristic of his people from the time of its origins. In his sweeping historical overviews in chapters 20 and 23, he traces his people's bent toward rebellion right back to its origins in Egypt and then goes on to say that nothing since then has changed very much. Of Jerusalem itself he writes in 16:8, that while Yahweh has truly chosen her and thereby forged a quite special 'covenant' between himself and this city, its flagrant political, social, and religious 'whoring' requires that she too be treated as those judged who commit adultery and murder. So even that covenant is now worthless.

Yahweh's sovereign purpose is yet another theme running through these oracles. This is Ezekiel's concept of Yahweh's sovereign purpose in history, expressed in the phrase "that you might know that I am Yahweh" (6:7, 7:4, 9, 27, etc.). This leitmotif of the book, as we might call it, expresses the core conviction of this prophet that Yahweh's action in Israel's history is simply an outworking of his desire to make himself known—and not only to Israel, but to the whole world. It is only the fact that Yahweh's 'Name' has become associated with Israel that Yahweh is thereby compelled to spare her time and again, for were Israel to perish, Yahweh's name would perish with her and be profaned in the sight of the nations (20:9, 14).