

# The Voice of Ezekiel

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of hearing the voice of the Spirit and understanding the spiritual principles in Ezekiel's prophecies to avoid the tragedy of Israel and Christianity.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 6:9, John 3:5, Acts 13:27

**Topics:** "Spiritual Discernment", "Hearing God's Voice"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of discerning the deeper voice behind the words of Scripture, particularly in the context of Ezekiel's prophecies. He highlights the tragedy of Israel's failure to hear the voice of the prophets, which leads to a lack of understanding and spiritual blindness. Sparks contrasts mysticism with true spirituality, asserting that genuine spirituality is practical and transformative, while mysticism often leads to deception. He calls for believers to cultivate an ear attuned to the Spirit, as the true message of Ezekiel and the prophets is often missed when only the literal words are heard. The sermon concludes with a plea for a deeper spiritual awareness, echoing the need for an open ear to God's whispers.

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## Transcript

"They knew not... the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath" (Acts 13:27).

We would remind our readers that these messages are constituted by a principle which governs so much of the Bible. It is that, deeper than the words of Scripture, there is a voice; that it was - and is - possible to hear the words and miss the voice. The words are the statements; the voice is the meaning. We have proved this to be the case by such a statement as that in Isaiah 6:9: "Hear ye indeed, but understand not, and see ye indeed (margin: 'continually') but perceive not." This is the condition lying behind our basic quotation in Acts 13:27.

The "voice" of Ezekiel has its own particular significance, and is very rich and challenging in the context of religion, and Christianity in particular as it has become.

Isaiah is mentioned many times in the New Testament, but this is not so with regard to Ezekiel, who is not quoted by name, but there is a profusion of allusions to his prophecies. On the surface of much of the New Testament his symbolisms are obvious, and beneath the surface his spiritual principles are not far to seek. It is this significance which constitutes the tragedy of Israel and the pathetic weakness and ineffectiveness of much that is called Christian. It is the failure to discern

## The Essential Difference Between the Literal and the Spiritual

What a lot of labour has been spent upon trying to explain this book, and what a lot of explanation proves futile, if not foolish! This Prophet, more than any other, conveys his message in symbols and parables, and, while some of these can be easily interpreted by history, there is much which cannot be so interpreted literally without entering upon the realm of the impossible and the ridiculous. The only answer to this latter lies in spiritual principles, not in literal fulfilments. We will instance this shortly. But here we immediately find ourselves confronted with an imperative necessity: it is to point out another fundamental distinction. The literalists have resorted to an evasion of enigmas by launching a charge of 'spiritualizing things away'. In so doing they leave much without a satisfactory explanation, and - worse than that - they fall into the very deception which gives so much falsehood to so much 'Christianity'.

It is therefore necessary, before we can understand Ezekiel, to give space to this vital distinction which so few are able to recognize. It is

## The Difference Between Mysticism and Spirituality

How terrible, and at what loss is this failure! Between these two things there are all the differences of two worlds, and if the contrast were understood there would be greater care in the use of the word 'mystical' in relation to such things as 'the body of Christ', 'Christianity', 'the elements of the Lord's Supper', etc. Perhaps the chief distinction between the two things is that mysticism is rarely - if ever - practical (in spite of a common phrase: 'Practical mystic'), while spirituality is most positively practical. Let us explain.

Mysticism has to do with the soulical senses, and usually relates to emotional and aesthetic impressions. It is the effect of music, pictures, ceremonial, ritual, vestments, pageantry, dramatic episodes, solemnities of voices, sounds, intonings, regalia, lighting (or the opposite), and all such things. The effect is transient and confined to the occasion. We have known the most vicious explosions of rival hatreds to take place immediately after those concerned have been in attendance at a celebration of the Festival of Corpus Christi, with the Elevation of the Host. This may be an extreme example, but it serves to define the nature of mysticism, for, during the 'Celebration', we heard those concerned groaning and swaying as if they were in the throes of Christ's physical agonies - which were being portrayed. Whether it be in such extreme form, or in much milder, mysticism is not practical in the sense of changing fundamental character, but puts people in a false realm, and deceives them into an idea as to themselves. It is an illusion, a false spirituality, and is - in its finest and also most evil forms - the devil's delusion. Religion, as such, can be just mysticism, without life-changing power; whether it be 'Christian' (?), Hindu, Buddhist, or any other.

On the other hand, what the Bible (particularly the New Testament) means by the spiritual is immensely and unavoidably practical. Basically it means a change of nature, as, said Christ: "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit", and thus "Ye must be born anew" (John 3:5,7). That is a statement of fact. The classic on the difference is by Paul in 1 Corinthians, chapter two. The contrast there is, in the first case, between the intensely religious, intellectual Ruler in Israel, Nicodemus, and a man born of the Spirit. In the second case, the contrasting of the 'natural' (Greek 'soulical') man, and 'He that is spiritual', and the focal point in both cases is understanding. Spirituality, therefore, according to the Bible, is essentially practical both as to the origin and the progress of the true Christian life. It is nothing less than a difference of species. The New Testament is founded and built upon this differentiation and contrast.

Herein, then, lies the tragedy of Israel and of much that is called Christianity. It is here, at this focal point, that failure to 'hear the voice of the prophets' is found. That is an essential preface to the understanding of

Ezekiel's symbolism, and with that introduction we can proceed.

The key to everything in Ezekiel's prophecies (the whole book) is the characteristic word. From chapter one to chapter forty-two reference is made twenty-four times to "the Spirit". The Spirit is the energy, the guide, the revealer, the life, etc. The Prophet attributes everything to the Spirit. No book in the Old Testament gives anything like as large a place to the Spirit by name. While the same word is used for wind or breath, it is impossible - without being absurd - to use such words in all the connections in this book. We are compelled to relate the Spirit to God - the Spirit of God - in the ultimate conclusion of this book. God is taking the initiative; God is manipulating the Prophet; God is showing His servant; it is God speaking to the "son of man" (another characteristic term). The inclusive conclusion is that the great issue for the people was that they were confronted with a work and speaking of the Spirit of God, and they neither saw nor heard. The result was that - as a nation - they were lost in captivity and only a remnant was saved. With more to say as to the message of this book, we have already reached the climax in principle.

We, in history, have before us in full view the fulfilment of terrible words uttered by the Lord Jesus. We can see a nation, from the year A.D. 70 until our own times, in the "outer darkness, weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth". This was said by Him to be the consequence of "the sin against the Holy Ghost", for which there is "no forgiveness". But we are also in Romans: "But a remnant shall be saved". The "Son of Man", anointed and filled with the Spirit, came first to Israel, speaking and working "by the finger of God" (the Holy Spirit). His words and His works were discredited and repudiated, and He was charged with "having a devil". They "killed the Prince of Life", demanding a form of death so shameful as would never be imposed on a Roman by Rome. This was the sin, and the centuries have told the story.

To conclude this introduction, what is the point? Is it not that particular issue raised by Jesus in His time among men, and later to the churches: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith"? It is sometimes positively amazing and staggering what even Christians - and Christian leaders - can do and say because of this deaf ear to the Spirit. They can take up and pass on most pernicious reports which are sheer lies and do untold harm to others and the Lord's interests because they do not so walk in the Spirit as to have Him say within: 'That is not true.' It is one thing to include belief in the Holy Spirit as a tenet of Christian doctrine, and it may be quite another thing to know when "the Spirit of truth" witnesses within the heart to the truth or the falsehood. It is significant that both the Remnant and the Overcomer are marked by this 'hearing the voice'. Jesus placed the ultimate issue of life or death upon this 'hearing the voice (not just the words) of the Son of Man'.

"Every sabbath" they heard the words, but not the voice.

Ezekiel has so much to say to us which demands an ear for the Spirit. Let us pray for the ear of Samuel -

"Oh, give me Samuel's ear -

An open ear, O Lord!

Alive and quick to hear

Each whisper of Thy word!"

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