

# God's Servant-King

Devotional Reading: [Isaiah 50:4–9](#)

Background Scripture: [Ezekiel 37:15–28](#)

## Ezekiel 37:21–28

<sup>21</sup> “And say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. <sup>22</sup> I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. <sup>23</sup> They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

<sup>24</sup> “‘My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. <sup>25</sup> They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. <sup>26</sup> I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. <sup>27</sup> My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their

God, and they will be my people. <sup>28</sup> Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’ ”

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## Key Text

*“My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ ”*

—Ezekiel 37:27

# The Righteous Reign of God

## Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God’s Power

## Lessons 1–5

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the identity of “my servant.”
2. Defend that identification.
3. Make a plan to change one area of his or her life that is inconsistent with being one of God’s people.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

A. Establishing Trust Again

B. Lesson Context

#### I. Return to the Land (Ezekiel 37:21–25)

A. Regathering (v. 21)

*Together?*

B. Reunification (v. 22)

C. Rededication (v. 23)

D. Reign (v. 24)

E. Residence (v. 25)

#### II. Covenant of Peace (Ezekiel 37:26–28)

A. Permanent Sanctuary (vv. 26–27)

B. Worldwide Knowledge (v. 28)

*When Healing Becomes Testimony*

#### Conclusion

A. Finding Life Again

## B. Prayer

## C. Thought to Remember

### How to Say It

Appalachian    *A-puh-lay-chun.*

Chaldean    *Kal-dee-un.*

Ephraim    *Ee-fray-im.*

Judean    *Joo-dee-un.*

Kebar    *Kee-bawr.*

Manasseh    *Muh-nass-uh.*

patriarch    *pay-tree-ark.*

## Introduction

### A. Establishing Trust Again

There is an old story of a man who comes to two great teachers and demands of them, “Teach me the Law of Moses while I stand on one foot.” The first one tells him that his request is unreasonable and sends him away. The second one tells him that the Law of Moses is about loving God and neighbor. “All the rest is commentary. Go and learn.”

We remember that Jesus said much the same thing in [Mark 12:29–31](#). But behind the elegant simplicity of that observation lies the hard fact that learning the ways of God requires work. And for that work to yield valid and fruitful results, the seeker must demonstrate honesty and open-mindedness. That gets to the heart of the matter: learning God’s Word is about trusting him. Learning to trust God requires a lifetime of

effort. But a commitment to do so pays daily and everlasting dividends.

Hearing, accepting, and trusting God’s Word involves more than just intellectual ability (again, [Mark 12:30](#)). It requires us to reorient our desires. We must want to trust, to hope, and to love. Today’s text helps clarify this needed reorientation.

## B. Lesson Context

Ezekiel lived at the time Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC ([Ezekiel 1:1–2](#); [33:21](#)). That destruction and accompanying exile was preceded by two other deportations. The first of those came in 605 BC, when Daniel and his friends were taken captive to Babylon ([2 Kings 24:1–2](#); [Daniel 1:1–6](#)). Ezekiel’s relocation to Babylon became part of the second deportation as he found himself among the 10,000 of the elite citizenry taken in 597 BC ([2 Kings 24:12–14](#)). Daniel and other Jews were taken to serve “in the king’s palace” ([Daniel 1:4](#)), while Ezekiel found himself “among the exiles by the Kebar River” where “the hand of the Lord was on him” ([Ezekiel 1:1, 3](#)).

The book of Ezekiel features many astonishing word pictures. One of the most famous is that of the valley of dry bones, in [Ezekiel 37:1–14](#). It is followed by the much less famous illustration of two sticks in [37:15–28](#). Both of these metaphors speak of the restoration of Israel while emphasizing different aspects of that reunification. Today’s lesson explores the significance of the metaphor involving the two sticks. As our text opens, Ezekiel had just been directed to show to an audience the stick on which he had written “Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him” and a second stick on which he had written “Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him” ([37:16](#)). The explanation follows.

# I. Return to the Land

(Ezekiel 37:21–25)

## A. Regathering (v. 21)

**21a.** “And say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

The beginning word *and* connects what follows with the previous verses that introduced imagery of two sticks (see the [Lesson Context](#)). The explanation, which now begins, is introduced by the familiar declarative phrase *this is what the Sovereign Lord says*. This phrase and its variations occur hundreds of times in the Old Testament. That which follows the phrase is authoritative!

**21b.** “‘I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land.

This verse introduces a series of specific future realities that together paint a picture of a new life to come. The predicted reality of the Israelites being regathered *into their own land* had been stated before ([Ezekiel 34:13](#)) and would be stated again ([39:25–28](#)). It was a message that bore repeating! And indeed it was repeated by other prophets as well (examples: [Isaiah 14:1–2](#); [Hosea 11:10–11](#); [Amos 9:15](#)).

The dispersion and scattering of *the Israelites*—commonly known as the Diaspora—continued into the time of Jesus (compare [James 1:1](#)). It seems unlikely, therefore, that the prophets expected each and every person of Israelite descent to return to Palestine. As the books of Ezra, Esther, and Daniel make clear, some Jews chose not to return to the homeland, and they continued to live in Gentile settings. There they continued to reflect deeply on how to maintain faith as a minority that was often persecuted. Even so, the return home and the rebuilding of

the temple signaled to everyone the presence of God.

Visual for [Lesson 3](#). *Allow one minute for silent reflection before asking volunteers to share what practical difference God's presence makes daily.*

## **Together?**

My grandmother grew up in a large, impoverished Appalachian family. As the oldest of 10 children, she watched her mother work hard to keep them all clothed and fed. That lifestyle produced in my grandmother a fierce loyalty to family, an intense work ethic, and a determination not to live the life her own mother had lived. So she turned down

marriage proposals and made her way north to work in a factory during World War II. There she met and married my grandfather.

Driven to improve the economic status of her family of origin, she invited one sibling after another to live with her as they reached adulthood. They found jobs and spouses and settled down into a better life. Eventually even my grandmother's parents moved next door to her and my grandfather. Yet despite the improvements that the move brought to their lifestyle, this close-knit family mourned the loss of their community and connection.

No matter how much a family can mourn a loss of such connection, God's pain is so much the greater in that regard ([Hosea 11:8](#); etc.)! Does this perhaps cause you to see a problem with all the divisions within Christianity today?

—L. M. W.

## B. Reunification (v. 22)

**22.** “I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.

The *one nation* of Israel had split into *two nations* in 931 BC, following the death of King Solomon ([1 Kings 11:41–12:24](#)). That situation may have seemed permanent, given the facts of two exiles (Assyrian and Babylonian) and the passage of three and a half centuries. But Ezekiel expected the 12 tribes of Israel to be reunified nonetheless.

In that regard, the verse at hand offers us an opportunity to clarify the use of some tribal names of [Ezekiel 37:15–20](#) (see [Lesson Context](#)). The 12 tribes of Israel were descended from the 12 sons of the patriarch Jacob (died about 1860 BC), who had his name changed to Israel ([Genesis](#)



32:28; 35:23–26).

Two of his 12 sons were Judah and Joseph. In the naming of the 12 tribal territories, one territory each is named after Jacob’s 12 sons, with two exceptions: the tribe of Levi (which received no territory as an inheritance, per [Deuteronomy 18:1](#)) and the tribe of Joseph. In the latter case, two tribal territories were named after Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh ([Numbers 34:23–24](#); [Joshua 14:4](#)). In time, the names Israel and Ephraim became synonyms in referring to the 10 northern tribes, while Judah became the designation for the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin ([2 Chronicles 11:1](#); [30:1](#); [Jeremiah 3:8](#); [Hosea 11:12](#); etc.).

When no longer divided between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, the people would enjoy a renewed unity. This reunification would happen under *one king*, in distinction to the two kings that had characterized divided Israel between 931 and 722 BC.

A difficulty here, of course, is that the monarchy was not restored after the return from Babylonian exile. Instead, the people had governors ([Nehemiah 5:14–15](#); [Haggai 1:1](#); [Malachi 1:8](#)). Promises such as Ezekiel’s here came to be seen not as literal predictions of a singular human king ruling in a specific place, but as anticipating the Messiah, whose rule would encompass all things.

### C. Rededication (v. 23)

**23a.** “They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses,

The forthcoming restoration was also to be characterized by the end of idolatry in all its forms. The verse at hand features two words that refer to false gods. The first, translated *idols*, is Ezekiel’s favorite in this regard; the underlying Hebrew appears **39** times in his book, out of 48

times in the Old Testament as a whole. The second word, translated *vile images*, occurs 16 times in Ezekiel, out of 50 total Old Testament occurrences; this word is also translated “abomination” in [Daniel 9:27](#); [11:31](#); and [12:11](#).

The double impact of both Hebrew words together occurs only here and in [Deuteronomy 29:17](#); [2 Kings 23:24](#); and [Ezekiel 20:7–8](#). The worship of false gods was the prime reason for all of the Israelites’ other problems. It had led to the defilement of the land in general and of the temple in particular ([8:1–16](#)). Cleaning the land and the temple of such religious filth would be important (compare [2 Kings 23:4–16](#)). Cleaning idolatry from hearts would be all the more so (compare [Ezekiel 14:2–7](#)).

### What Do You Think?

What in your life threatens to steal your attention and devotion away from God alone?

### Digging Deeper

What people or practices help you identify and reject potentially idolatrous thoughts and behaviors?

**23b.** “for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them.

However deep Israel’s problem with idolatry had been in the past, Ezekiel prophesied that the future would be different. Ezekiel did not think that the people could completely purge idolatry by their own willpower. Rather, God was to *cleanse them*. The people would experience the sort of physical and spiritual purification necessary for anyone going to the temple to worship (see [Psalm 24:3–4](#)). The forthcoming purification would affect all of life—life with God and life with one another.

## What Do You Think?

What other Scriptures encourage you that cleansing is God's work, not yours?

## Digging Deeper

What are your responsibilities following being cleansed by God?

### 23c. “They will be my people, and I will be their God.

The wholeness of the approach becomes clear in the last line of the verse. Instead of being alienated people suffering under divine judgment, the returning exiles will again become God's *people*. Given Ezekiel's priestly background ([Ezekiel 1:3](#)), the context of his thinking may be a text like [Leviticus 26](#) or the similar [Deuteronomy 28](#). Those texts expect expulsion from the promised land as the punishment for community-wide sin. But in connecting our verse's outcome with [Deuteronomy 14:2](#), we see a further connection to the New Testament era in [Titus 2:14](#) and [1 Peter 2:9](#).

## D. Reign (v. 24)

### 24a. “My servant David will be king over them,

This verse expands on [Ezekiel 37:22](#), above, in specifying the “one king” to be *David*. Davidic kingship, not just monarchy in general, was being prophesied. Ezekiel did not expect the literal, physical reincarnation of that ancient ruler, dead for nearly 400 years by Ezekiel's day. Rather, the expectation was that of the rise of a new ruler who was to be like David in one or more ways.

An example of this kind of interpretation presents itself in the case of John the Baptist, whom Jesus declared to be “Elijah who was to

come” ([Matthew 11:14](#)) as predicted in [Malachi 4:5](#). John the Baptist was not literally the prophet Elijah resurrected. Rather, John the Baptist was the one who ministered “in the spirit and power of” that long-ago prophet ([Luke 1:17](#); compare [Matthew 11:14](#); [17:10–13](#)).

**24b.** “‘and they will all have one shepherd.

Anyone who rules over God’s people should function as a shepherd. That designation describes someone who protects others from harm. The *one shepherd* to come would stand in stark contrast to the worthless shepherds who had exploited the people ([Jeremiah 23:1–6](#); [Ezekiel 34:1–10](#)). The contrast between good and bad shepherds continues into the New Testament ([John 10:1–16](#); [Acts 20:28](#); [Hebrews 13:20–21](#); [1 Peter 5:1–4](#); [Jude 12](#)).

### What Do You Think?

How do you experience Jesus’ shepherding in your present circumstances?

### Digging Deeper

How can you become more attuned to Jesus’ leading?

**24c.** “‘They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees.

This partial verse describes the behavior of the people that will result from the rule of the one shepherd-king to come. People tend to behave as their leaders do, and this fact was a driver of ending up in exile ([Jeremiah 44:16–17](#)). The shepherd-king will be a model of behavior that reflects the opposite. The result will be an era of justice, in which faithful people obey God’s *laws* and *decrees* fully.

## E. Residence (v. 25)

**25.** “They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever.

This verse summarizes promises already stated (compare [Ezekiel 11:17](#); [28:25](#); etc.). But it also adds a new idea: *forever*. The return to *the land* and the rule by *David the servant* will both be permanent in some sense. But as we noted in [lesson 2](#), the Hebrew behind the wording *forever* does not necessarily require us to think in terms of “eternity without end,” since it may signify “age enduring” or “to the end of the age” (compare [Psalm 132:12](#)).

## II. Covenant of Peace ([Ezekiel 37:26–28](#))

### A. Permanent Sanctuary (vv. [26–27](#))

**26.** “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever.

In the Bible, a covenant indicated a long-term, usually permanent agreement between two parties, in which each party assumed a set of responsibilities. [Leviticus 26](#) and [Deuteronomy 28](#) describe the relationship between God and Israel as a covenant. When the Israelites violated the terms of the covenant, God gave them chances to repent. But when they refused, the punishments of the covenant were activated. The ultimate punishment involved Israel’s expulsion from its own land ([Leviti-](#)

cus 18:25, 28).

Ezekiel insisted that even after the catastrophe of exile, God would renew the covenant; this promise was nothing new (see [Deuteronomy 30](#); [1 Kings 8:46–51](#)). Ezekiel calls the new arrangement *a covenant of peace*, a designation he uses also in [Ezekiel 34:25](#). This is a fairly rare phrase in the Bible, occurring elsewhere only in [Numbers 25:12](#); [Isaiah 54:10](#); and [Malachi 2:5](#).

The focal point of the people’s renewal (*increase their numbers*) was to be the (rebuilt) temple in Jerusalem (*my sanctuary*). That building was a symbol of God’s abiding presence among the people ([1 Kings 8:10–11](#)).

The promised peace would therefore be more than a mere absence of conflict. Rather, it was to be a condition in which the people would flourish as God intended. Ezekiel insisted that this new arrangement would in some sense be permanent, given that the terms *everlasting* and *forever* are translations of the same word translated “forever” in [Ezekiel 37:25](#), above.

### What Do You Think?

When have you experienced peace as more than just the absence of conflict?

### Digging Deeper

As far as it depends on you, what can be done to share such peace with others?

**27.** “My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Paul quotes this verse in [2 Corinthians 6:16](#). There he uses “temple” in place of *dwelling place*; the two served the same function in the Old Testament, the temple being the successor and permanent version of the

portable dwelling place, the tabernacle. Paul's usage is in the wider context of Christians personally being "the temple of the living God."

The word translated *dwelling place* is also translated "tents" in [Psalms 78:28](#) and "dwellings" in [Jeremiah 30:18](#), which again underlines the idea of God's presence. The Israelites knew, of course, that God did not literally reside in a building in the same way that human beings do (see [1 Kings 8:27](#); compare [Acts 7:48–50](#); [17:24](#)). Yet the temple was a sort of magnet for the prayers of the faithful as they sought God's guidance and protection. A wrong view eventually came into thinking when the people held the temple in such high regard that they viewed it as something of a good-luck charm that made them immune from attack ([Jeremiah 7:1–8](#)). Even so, the verse at hand emphasizes the willingness of God to be among the people who were to return from exile and to aid them in various ways.

## B. Worldwide Knowledge (v. 28)

**28.** "Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.'"

This section concludes by announcing the awareness of non-Israelites to God's intent for *Israel*. One might imagine that neither God nor the Israelites would care about the opinions of those outside the covenant of promise. However, the Old Testament, especially the book of Ezekiel, witnesses several references to God's concern for his reputation among non-Israelites ([20:9, 14, 22](#); [36:20–23](#)).

Having noted some possibilities regarding the term *forever* in [Ezekiel 37:26](#) above, we should also take note of [Revelation 21:3](#). That text and others promise a future when God will be immediately present to his people for all eternity.

### **What Do You Think?**

What evidence can nonbelievers see in your congregation that God lives among you?

### **Digging Deeper**

What, if any, congregational issues might distract nonbelievers from experiencing God's presence in your assembly times?

## **When Healing Becomes Testimony**

The mother held her baby for the last time. Tears poured down her cheeks as she rocked the unconscious infant. Engulfed in her grief, she seemed oblivious to her husband's attempts to comfort her. Each of the other mothers present felt the stab of grief as if it were her own. When this mother rose to leave her baby's lifeless body, she paused at the door to look at him one last time, sure she could not live a whole life without him.

Several years later, this same woman organized a retreat for mothers grieving for the same reason. She had found comfort and healing in relationships with other moms who had lost children, and she determined to pass that comfort along. It's been said that "God never wastes your pain," and hers was not wasted.

The Scriptures witness frequently to God's promise to heal his people's pain. Those watching would know that God had extended great care to his people. How can God use your difficult experiences as a testimony to his greatness and salvation?

—L. M. W.



# Conclusion

## A. Finding Life Again

Rebuilding a community after any kind of disaster is difficult work. For progress to be made, those affected must acknowledge their pain, find resources for renewed hope, and take practical steps to build a new life. The Judean prophets, priests, and other leaders of the sixth century BC took precisely those steps during and after the Babylonian (Chaldean) exile. God made sure that they did!

Connecting practical steps with the values, commitments, and dreams of a congregation presents an ongoing challenge, as all church leaders know. We easily drift into saying, “We must do *something*; here is something; therefore, we must do this.” Clear thinking about *why* we need to act in a certain way easily gets lost. Ezekiel made sure that his audience thought deeply about what to do and why. He held out the hope not just of reclaiming lost spaces and practices, but of reentering the deeper meaning of those very spaces and practices.

We need constant renewal in this regard. Before assuming that “God is on our side,” we should ask, “Are we on his?” The latter question will invite a season of self-reflection and prayer. That in turn puts us in a position for being equipped “with everything good for doing his will, ... through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever” ([Hebrews 13:20–21](#)).

## B. Prayer

God of all generations, who restores and renews us after catastrophes of our own making, grant us a deeper sense of your presence in our lives.

May your church then become an example to all the world of what those created in your image may be. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Bless your successors by your own hope-filled obedience to God.

## Involvement Learning

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

### Into the Lesson

Divide learners into three groups. Give each group a bag of about 30 craft sticks or thin cards and instruct them to build a “dwelling” in five minutes or less. When they are finished, ask the whole class to analyze what each building’s greatest strength is, as well as its greatest weakness. Then have groups dismantle their individual dwellings and combine all the materials together to form one bigger, better, and stronger dwelling.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “What’s in a Word?” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

After either activity, transition to the Bible study. Say, “In this week’s lesson, notice how God brings his people together, gives them a dwelling place, and makes them strong.”

## Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Ezekiel 37:21–22](#). Have two volunteers read these additional verses: [Deuteronomy 30:1–4](#) and [Isaiah 43:5–7](#). Ask: “What are the common words and promises made in all three passages?” (Expected responses include: scattered, gather, bring back.)

Read [Ezekiel 37:23–25](#) out loud. Then divide the class into three groups, designating one group as the **Jeremiah Group**, the second as the **Matthew Group**, and the third as the **Luke Group**. Based on [Ezekiel 37:23–25](#), each group should identify how the new kingdom (1) will differ from all others and (2) will be superior to all others. Then have the groups answer this question based on their assigned additional text: “How do these verses clarify who the servant David is in Ezekiel’s prophecy?”

**Jeremiah Group.** Read [Jeremiah 23:3–6](#).

**Matthew Group.** Read [Matthew 21:9–11](#).

**Luke Group.** Read [Luke 1:31–33](#).

Bring the groups back together to discuss what they discovered in these additional verses. Then ask for other verses that come to mind regarding who the servant David of [Ezekiel 37](#) is.

Ask a volunteer to read [Ezekiel 37:26–28](#). Ask, “What words in these verses signify permanency?” Then assign one of these psalms of ascent to each of the three groups: [Psalms 121](#); [131](#), and [133](#). Give learners time to read and discuss within their group what the theme of the psalm is. Bring the groups together and ask each group read the last verse of their psalm aloud to hear what the three psalms have in common. (Expected response: “Forever!”)

## Into Life

Allow a few moments for participants to imagine what it will be like to live in a kingdom as described in Ezekiel. Ask, “What words or phrases would you use to describe the people of God in this context?” Suggest that participants reread the verses to help them in this exercise. Write responses on the board. (Possible responses include: unified, at peace, thriving, secure, holy.) Then challenge participants: “Is there a word or phrase on the board that you don’t think describes you? If so, spend some time this week praying for that thing to become more evident in your life.” Divide participants into pairs to share their thoughts about this and pray for each other.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “United Forever” activity from the activity page. Have participants work in pairs to complete as indicated. Then bring the class together to discuss how the various puzzle pieces work together. Have learners color in one piece that isn’t an accurate description of his or her experience in God’s kingdom. Ask the partners to pray for one another regarding the growth area(s) they both identified.