Ezekiel 4

The Siege Acted Out: Bearing the Iniquity

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION

"These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."
Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

God told Ezekiel to preach with his whole body. A brick, an iron plate, a bed and a ration of dung-baked bread said what the exiles didn't want to hear: Jerusalem will not hold. Sin has a weight, and somebody has to carry it — and those days of judgment were measured out by God, a day for each year.

Ed Smith · Started 20 October 2026

Scripture in the text and key-verse cards: King James Version (public domain). Quotations in the notes: New American Standard Bible® (NASB 1995), © The Lockman Foundation; used by permission. Commentary sources: David Guzik, Enduring Word.

00 The Text

EZEKIEL 4 (KJV), MARKED

▲ Gold — God — His character & actions	Green — Command / instruction	Sky — Key repeated word
⚠ Rose — Sin / warning	★ Violet — Promise / blessing	Amber — Time / place / contrast

[1] Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and pourtray upon it the city, even Jerusalem:

[2] And lay siege against it, and build a fort against it, and cast a mount against it; set the camp also against it, and set battering rams against it round about.

[3] Moreover take thou unto thee an iron pan, and set it for a wall of iron between thee and the city: and set thy face against it, and it shall be besieged, and thou shalt lay siege against it. ▲ This shall be a sign to the house of Israel.

[4] Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it: according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it thou shalt bear their iniquity.

[5] For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days: so shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel.

[6] And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side, and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: ▲ I have appointed thee each day for a year .

[7] Therefore thou shalt set thy face toward the siege of Jerusalem, and thine arm shall be uncovered, and thou shalt prophesy against it.

[8] And, behold, ▲ I will lay bands upon thee, and thou shalt not turn thee from one side to another, till thou hast ended the days of thy siege.

[9] Take thou also unto thee wheat, and barley, and beans, and lentiles, and millet, and fitches, and put them in one vessel, and make thee bread thereof, according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon thy side, three hundred and ninety days shalt thou eat thereof.

[10] And thy meat which thou shalt eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day: from time to time shalt thou eat it.

[11] Thou shalt drink also water by measure, the sixth part of an hin: from time to time shalt thou drink.

[12] And thou shalt eat it as barley cakes, and thou shalt ⚠ bake it with dung that cometh out of man, in their sight.

[13] And the LORD said, Even thus shall the children of Israel ⚠ eat their defiled bread among the Gentiles, whither I will drive them.

[14] Then said I, Ah Lord GOD! behold, my soul hath not been polluted: for from my youth up even till now have I not eaten of that which dieth of itself, or is torn in pieces; neither came there abominable flesh into my mouth.

[15] Then he said unto me, Lo, ★ I have given thee cow's dung for man's dung, and thou shalt prepare thy bread therewith.

[16] Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, behold, ▲ I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem: and they shall eat bread by weight, and with care; and they shall drink water by measure, and with astonishment:

17 That they may want bread and water, and be astonied one with another, and consume away for their iniquity.

Marked in the text

- **v1** son of man *(every occurrence)*
- **v1** the city, even Jerusalem
- **v2** lay siege against it
- **v3** a wall of iron between thee and the city
- **v3** This shall be a sign to the house of Israel
- **v4** Lie thou also upon thy left side
- **v4** iniquity *(every occurrence)*
- **v4** thou shalt bear their iniquity
- **v5** three hundred and ninety days
- **v6** forty days
- **v6** I have appointed thee each day for a year
- **v7** set thy face toward the siege of Jerusalem
- **v7** thine arm shall be uncovered
- **v8** I will lay bands upon thee
- **v9** make thee bread thereof
- **v10** twenty shekels a day
- **v11** water by measure
- **v12** bake it with dung that cometh out of man
- **v13** eat their defiled bread among the Gentiles
- **v14** Ah Lord GOD
- **v14** my soul hath not been polluted
- **v15** I have given thee cow's dung for man's dung
- **v16** I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem
- **v17** consume away for their iniquity

Marks are drawn on the KJV text. Quotations in the notes are from the NASB95, so their wording may differ from the KJV above.

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 4:4 (KJV)

4 Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it: according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it thou shalt bear their iniquity.

Setting

Ezekiel is a priest (1:3) living among the exiles by the river Chebar in Babylon. His call came "in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile" (1:2) — about 593 BC. Jerusalem is still standing, Zedekiah is on the throne, and the exiles expect to go home soon. God has just made Ezekiel a watchman and shut his mouth except when God gives him a word (3:17, 26–27). So his first message is not a sermon. It is a street drama — acted out in front of his neighbors.

Structure

- vv1–3 — **the toy siege:** "get yourself a brick" (v1) and draw Jerusalem on it. "Lay siege against it, build a siege wall" (v2), with ramps, camps and battering rams. Then set "an iron plate" between himself and the city and "set your face toward it" (v3). "This is a sign to the house of Israel" (v3).

- vv4–8 — **bearing the iniquity:** lie on the left side for Israel — "you shall bear their iniquity" (v4) — for "three hundred and ninety days" (v5); then on the right side to "bear the iniquity of the house of Judah" forty days, "a day for each year" (v6). Face the siege "with your arm bared" and "prophesy against it" (v7). "I will put ropes on you" so he cannot turn "until you have completed the days of your siege" (v8).
- vv9–12 — **siege bread:** "wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet and spelt" in one vessel — "make them into bread for yourself" (v9). Rations: "twenty shekels a day" of food (v10) and "the sixth part of a hin" of water (v11). Bake it as a barley cake "over human dung," in their sight (v12).
- vv13–15 — **the objection:** the LORD explains: the sons of Israel will "eat their bread unclean among the nations where I will banish them" (v13). Ezekiel cries out, "Ah, Lord GOD!" — "I have never been defiled" (v14); "nor has any unclean meat ever entered my mouth" (v14). God allows "cow's dung in place of human dung" (v15).
- vv16–17 — **the meaning:** "I am going to break the staff of bread in Jerusalem" (v16). They will eat bread by weight "with anxiety" and drink water by measure "in horror" (v16), "because bread and water will be scarce" (v17); they will "be appalled with one another and waste away in their iniquity" (v17).

Repeated words

iniquity (vv4, 5, 6, 17); siege / besiege (vv2, 3, 7, 8); days (vv4, 5, 6, 8, 9); bread (vv9, 13, 15, 16, 17); weight (vv10, 16); measure (vv11, 16).

Contrasts

Exiles hoping Jerusalem will rescue them ⟷ a brick-model Jerusalem under siege (vv1–2). An iron wall between the prophet and the city (v3) ⟷ the prophet bearing the city's iniquity on his own body (vv4–6). Israel's 390 (v5) ⟷ Judah's 40 (v6). Priestly purity — "I have never been defiled" (v14) ⟷ bread baked over dung (v12). Bread by weight (v16) ⟷ people wasting away (v17).

Chapter theme (my words)

God told Ezekiel to preach with his whole body. A brick, an iron plate, a bed and a ration of dung-baked bread said what the exiles didn't want to hear: Jerusalem will not hold. Sin has a weight, and somebody has to carry it — and those days of judgment were measured out by God, a day for each year.

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 4:3 (KJV)

3 Moreover take thou unto thee an iron pan, and set it for a wall of iron between thee and the city: and set thy face against it, and it shall be besieged, and thou shalt lay siege against it. ▲ This shall be a sign to the house of Israel.

Why act it out? (vv1–3)

Ezekiel's mouth was bound (3:26), so God gave him signs instead of speeches. The brick (soft clay, like a drawing tablet) became Jerusalem; the siege works were what Babylon would soon build. Guzik pictures it like a child with toy soldiers — something a crowd would stop and watch. The iron plate is the striking detail. Guzik reads it as a sign that God would not step in to save the city; Wiersbe, in Guzik, says it showed God could no longer look on the nation "with approval and blessing." Ezekiel set his face against it, standing in God's place. For the exiles who expected Jerusalem to stand, the drama was "a sure sign that it would not be so" (Guzik).

390 days and 40 days (vv4–6)

Ezekiel lies on his left side for Israel, then on his right for Judah. In Hebrew orientation (facing east), left is north (Israel) and right is south (Judah). The numbers have puzzled interpreters for centuries:

- **Years of Judah's kings** — Guzik says the best explanation "was stated by Wiersbe," who adds up the reigns of Judah's kings from Rehoboam to Zedekiah (about 394 years) and adjusts for Rehoboam's early faithful years to arrive "very close" to 390.
- **A period of punishment, not of sinning** — Feinberg, quoted by Guzik: "the period must not represent the time of Israel's sinning." On this view the numbers measure the years the people would bear the consequences.
- **Echoes of the exodus** — 390 + 40 = 430, the years Israel spent in Egypt (Exod 12:40); and forty days for forty years recalls the wilderness, "a day for each year" (Num 14:34). Many see a picture of a new bondage and a new wilderness before a new deliverance.

Guzik doesn't force a single answer. The main point is clear: the iniquity is real, it has been building a long time, and God has measured the punishment.

Did he lie there all day? (vv7–8)

Guzik says the lying was "presumably" on his bed at home, and not necessarily all day — the bread-making shows Ezekiel "was not *completely* inactive." He suggests the lying happened at a set time each day. Block suggests "several hours each day," and Feinberg: "It is not necessary to assume that Ezekiel was in the prone position day and night." The bared arm pictures readiness to act — Poole: the arm is "the stronger and more ready to act." The ropes show that the siege could not be shaken off; God Himself held Ezekiel to it (compare 3:25).

Siege bread (vv9–12)

A mix of six grains and legumes in one pot is what people eat when the storehouse is almost empty — you throw together whatever is left. Taylor, in Guzik, figures the twenty shekels at "almost exactly 8 ounces of bread per day" and the water at "a fraction over a pint." Poole: "Scarce enough to keep the man alive." The dung was fuel, not ingredient. Guzik notes the command concerns the fire, not the bread; Wright observes that in a siege the animals are eaten, so "only human excrement would be available for fuel." The picture is of exile — a life where keeping the Law's cleanness would be impossible (v13; compare Deut 23:12–14; Hos 9:3).

"Ah, Lord GOD!" (vv14–15)

Ezekiel was a priest, raised to keep himself clean (Lev 11; 22:8). He never protested lying on his side for over a year — but this was too much. Guzik: Ezekiel "had never so offensively broken Jewish dietary laws." God listened. He allowed cow's dung instead, and Guzik's summary is exact: "God allowed Ezekiel to lessen the offense, but not take it away." Meyer, in Guzik, says it is "quite permissible for us to go into the secret place of the Most High" with our complaints. God is not offended by an honest objection from an obedient servant.

The staff of bread broken (vv16–17)

"Staff of bread" means the bread a person leans on to live (Lev 26:26). When it breaks, people weigh every crumb with anxiety and stare at one another in horror. This came true in the siege of 588–586 BC (2 Kgs 25:3; Lam 4:4–10). The last words name the cause: they "waste away in their iniquity" (v17). Poole: "Thus their sins would bring them to extremest want and shame."

Word study (Hebrew)

- **brick — *lebenah* (H3843):** a clay brick or tile, soft enough to draw on.
- **siege — *matsor* (H4692):** a siege, a hemming in, distress.
- **battering rams — *kar* (H3733):** a ram; also a battering ram.
- **plate — *machabath* (H4227):** a flat iron griddle or pan used for baking.
- **sign — *oth* (H226):** a sign, signal, token.
- **iniquity — *avon* (H5771):** guilt, iniquity — both the wrong and the punishment it brings.
- **bear — *nasa* (H5375):** to lift, carry, bear (used of bearing guilt, Lev 16:22).
- **ropes — *aboth* (H5688):** a cord, rope, something twisted together.
- **spelt — *kussemeth* (H3698):** spelt, a coarse wheat.
- **dung — *gelel* (H1561):** dung, refuse.
- **cow's dung — *tsephia* (H6832):** cattle dung (used only here).
- **unclean — *tame* (H2931):** ceremonially defiled, impure.
- **staff — *matteh* (H4294):** a staff, rod; something leaned on.
- **horror — *shimmamon* (H8078):** appallment, stunned desolation.
- **waste away — *maqaq* (H4743):** to rot, dwindle, pine away.

Cross-references

Exod 12:40; Lev 16:21–22; Lev 26:26; Lev 26:39; Num 14:34; Deut 23:12–14; 2 Kgs 25:1–3; Isa 20:2–4; Isa 53:6; Isa 53:11; Jer 39:1–2; Lam 4:4–10; Ezek 3:25–27; Ezek 5:16; Ezek 12:11; Hos 9:3; Acts 10:14; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 4:7 (KJV)

7 Therefore thou shalt set thy face toward the siege of Jerusalem, and thine arm shall be uncovered, and thou shalt prophesy against it.

Command to obey — "make them into bread for yourself."

God asked Ezekiel to do something strange, humbling and long — and he did it, day after day. Obedience isn't always one big moment; sometimes it's 430 days of the same hard thing. I'll keep doing the small, unseen thing God has put in front of me today, even when no one understands it.

Sin to confess — iniquity has weight

Ezekiel lay down under the weight of a nation's sin. I can treat my sin as light — a habit, a slip, a mood. But God measured Israel's and Judah's iniquity in years. I'll stop calling my sin small, name it to God, and let Him show me how heavy it really is.

Warning to heed — the staff of bread breaks

The people in Jerusalem leaned on their city, their temple and their stockpile, and every one of those things failed. The men I walk with in recovery know this: the bottle, the pill, the hustle all promised to hold you up and then broke under you. Whatever I lean on other than God will one day break. I want to find that out on my knees, not in a siege.

Promise to trust — God measures the judgment

The days were counted — 390 and 40, not one more. Even God's discipline has limits He sets. And Ezekiel's sign points past itself to the One who would truly bear our iniquity: "the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him" (Isa 53:6). For a man doing time, the sentence feels endless. God knows the number of the days, and in Christ the debt of sin is paid in full.

Example to follow — "Ah, Lord GOD!"

Ezekiel obeyed, but he also told God honestly what troubled him — and God listened and adjusted. I don't have to fake it with God. I can bring Him my real objections, and still be the servant who does what He asks.

Worship

You are the God who sees the end from the beginning, who measures the days, who keeps Your word in judgment and in mercy. You listened to a troubled prophet. You laid our iniquity on Your Son.

Prayer

Lord GOD, show me the true weight of my sin, and thank You that Jesus carried it. Break every staff I lean on that isn't You. Give me Ezekiel's patience to obey in the long, hard places, and his honesty to tell You what I feel. Use my life as a sign to the men around me that You are real and Your word is true. Amen.