
Day 228 - August 16

Judah After Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE) *Ezekiel's Denunciations of Judah*

Readings: *Ezekiel 8:1-18; 9:1-11; 10:1-22; 11:1-25*

Reflections:

- For five years from 591 to 586 BCE, Ezekiel delivers a number of judgments against Judah for its constant loyalty to idolatry, false prophets, and rebellious and corrupt leaders. The first vision outlined is one that is given to Ezekiel as he is sitting in his house with a group of Elders from Israel. "...a figure like that of a man..." appears to Ezekiel and then through the Spirit takes Ezekiel to the temple. Here at the temple he is shown the idol of jealousy, an image that arouses the anger and jealousy of God. In the vision, Ezekiel is told to dig through the temple wall where he finds a hidden doorway. Once on the inside, he finds that in the dark and secrecy of the temple the seventy leading priests are worshipping at their own private, hidden altars. The one priest is named specifically, Jaazaniah, son of Shaphan. Ezekiel is asked, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.'" People abandon God as their leader and provider when they feel that God is no longer with them. The priests have turned to these idols for comfort and a sense of meeting their own needs because they have given up hope that God will take care of them. The temptation remains the same today. When we feel God is absent, we turn to those things that bring us comfort even when we know God has told us to trust in him and not look to those other sources of security or comfort.
- Ezekiel is then shown in the image more examples of Israel's spiritual leadership acting out in sin. A woman mourning for a pagan god Tammaz, twenty five men worshipping the sun (See 2 Kings 21:5 for the start of sun and other astral deities) rather than worshipping God within the temple (see Joel 2:17 for an example of the elders worshipping God in the exact same location within the temple), as well as acts of violence throughout the land (possibly child or human sacrifice) are brought before Ezekiel in his vision. The reference to "them putting the branch to their nose" may also be a reference to idolatry as it was the practice of pagan kings to worship the sun by putting a flower to their nose as they worshipped. And so although the priests worship secretly, the rest of the people worship openly and publicly. The result? Complete devastation to their communication with God. "Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them."

- The next image is one of terrible judgment. A scribe with a writing kit is called in with the guards of the city. He is commanded to put a mark (literally the letter “tav” which looked like an “X” in Hebrew) on the foreheads of everyone that is grieving in their hearts over the sin of Israel. All the others are to be executed by the guards without mercy, the elderly, men and women and even children. Here we see that it is not a person’s age that establishes complete innocence. It is all a matter of the heart. Those that have humble and God-honoring hearts (and only God knows this) are spared. Those that are rebellious and reject him face judgment. The judgment begins with the spiritual leaders in the temple. The temple itself would be defiled by God with the slain that would fall there. Their symbol of religion was being defiled by God because they had defiled it with their own sin. One day the temple would be destroyed once and for all because of the sin and rebellion of the people.
- We should pause to note the parallel of this passage to the book of Revelations. Revelations 7:3 and 14:1 refer to God marking his own people with this seal on their foreheads. Previously to this, it was supposed to be the Torah that was the mark on their foreheads as they were bind it to themselves on their hands and foreheads (see Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18). The Law was supposed to set them apart. Here in Ezekiel we see that it is a mark that would set them apart, not based on the Law but on their heart’s condition before God. In Revelations, we see it is God himself who marks those that are considered his own. In the end of Revelations 22:4 it is God’s name what is ultimately written on their foreheads, a sign of God’s complete acceptance and ownership replacing the Law.
- What is interesting in the book of Revelations is that the beast also uses a mark to set apart all those apart of his kingdom and this mark would be on either on the right hand or forehead. Here we see the image of competing loyalties and the war between the two kingdoms as the false leaders spoken of in Revelations will try to mirror what we see modeled in God’s kingdom. See Revelations 13:15-17 and 14:9.
- In Ezekiel 10, the four living creatures and the throne-chariot of God returns. Coals from under the chariots are taken and scattered across the city in judgment. The description is almost identical with the exception of one of the four creatures is described as having the face of a cherub rather than the face of an ox. Yet, Ezekiel goes on to say it was actually an identical experience. “There faces has the same appearances as those I had seen by the Kedar River.” This could be an example of a copying error in transmission. Why have the four living creatures appeared? It is to signal the presence of God departing from the temple. Just as in the days of Solomon when the glory of the Lord entered the temple (2 Chronicle 5:13-14), now we see the glory of God leaving the temple.
- In Ezekiel 11 the images of judgment continue to mount. The dead in the streets of Jerusalem are declared to be meat and the city itself a cooking pot. In Ezekiel 24 we will see that the actual siege of the city will be pictured as heating up this boiling pot. While Ezekiel is prophesying this, the two key leaders he mentions actually die. This causes him to fall

facedown and cry out for mercy. Again we see the prophets heart is not toward judgment but ultimately towards redemption.

- In the final section of Ezekiel 11 we find God making it perfectly clear what he will do. In the ongoing story of “what doesn’t work” we see God begin to announce what will ultimately work to transform his people’s lives: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ultimately, these are the laws of love). They will be my people, and I will be their God.” Here we see God prophesying through Ezekiel that the true and lasting change that will happen will come from the outpouring of God’s Spirit on all people (See Joel 2) and his transformation of our heart. This inside out transformation is the only thing that can truly change a person. Having the rules (laws), a secure space where people can’t bother you (the promised land), having leaders to follow (the kings), and being held accountable (the punishment by God for disobeying) do not ultimately bring about the life change we all want. We have witnessed it over and over again that outside-in change doesn’t work. God makes it clear that this is what he will ultimately do and as we will see, it will come through the one called Messiah, a man named Jesus!
- Following this, Ezekiel is taken in his vision with presence of God to the exiles in Babylonia. Ezekiel tells all those in Babylon everything he has seen.