



Week 4: You Always Hurt the Ones You Love

Week 4, Day 1 – Read Ezekiel 14:1-8

Understanding the Passage

Despite the recent hope that God offers the exiles in chapter 11, Ezekiel's overall message to his audience continues to remain grim. The prophet has not wavered from the truth that Judah is going to be destroyed despite what other oracles and divinations are telling the people. Here in chapter 14 Yahweh accuses the exiles of idolatry, similar to their counterparts back in Jerusalem. They have devoted themselves to other deities, a very serious sin during this time. Elders are approaching Ezekiel in order to see if the prophet will intercede on their behalf in hopes that Yahweh will soften the message against them. These exilic leaders represent the whole people of Israel; what Yahweh says to them applies also and equally to all of God's people.

The fact that the elders come to Ezekiel after he has had nothing but bad news for them suggests that either the prophet has garnered status among the exiles as a true priest and prophet of Yahweh, or that things are continuing to go poorly for the exiles, motivating them to return to the prophet who told them why they were there in the first place. In this passage we never hear exactly what the elders are asking Ezekiel to say to Yahweh, leaving us in the dark about their motivation. Regardless of the motivation of the elders, God's response is swift and unwavering. God tells Ezekiel that he will not listen to the people who have let idols become a stumbling block in their life and separate them from God.

This might be compared to a child who has been sent to his or her room and told not to come out until they have cleaned it. At first the child may choose to ignore the command of the parent and simply play alone in their room. But after time passes the child realizes that they need something and run out to ask their parent for it. As the child starts to make their request, the parent cuts them off and says, "Until you clean your room, I don't want to hear anything from you." God takes seriously the idols that the exiles have taken into their hearts, after all, that is what sent them into Babylon in the first place. For the relationship to be restored, real work needs to be done. Even if the people remembered their need for Yahweh, they need to address the very things that originally caused the separation.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. After being sent into exile, the people continued to turn away from God. Have you ever done something that you knew was wrong, felt guilty about it, but still continued to do it?
3. Do you feel as though God was being too hard on the people by not listening to their requests?
4. What might God be asking you to remove from your life that has become a stumbling block for you?

Week 4, Day 2 – Read Ezekiel 16: 1-14

Understanding the Passage

Similar to some of the more graphic images found in Song of Songs, God paints quite a visual picture in this passage when talking about Jerusalem. This imagery is so graphic, in fact, that Orthodox Jews are not allowed to read chapter 16 in public. Jerusalem is reminded of its Canaanite origin in the period before the rise of Israel. The specific connections with Amorites and Hittites are not as important as the fact that the City of Jerusalem was at one time pagan. Cast out like an unwanted child left to die, God saved Jerusalem and allowed her to grow and become beautiful. In verse nine God pledges himself to Jerusalem and enters into a contract or covenant with her. This implies the metaphor of marriage and insinuates a deeper relationship than a king over his subjects. God and Jerusalem are lovers and God cleanses his bride and dresses her in the finest of things in order to make her more beautiful. This passage leaves the reader with the impression that Yahweh has spared no expense in clothing his wife.

This may remind us of the father's response to when his "prodigal" son returned home. The father was so in love with the son and happy for his return that he embraced him and clothed him with his royal attire. The father did not respond as one might expect a Lord to address his wayward servant, but as a father who loves his son and longs to dote on him.

There is no doubt that this passage is graphic, however, God through the prophet Ezekiel is conveying strong emotions which are meant to leave an impression on the reader. As we will see in tomorrow's reading, the depth to which God has saved, loved, and glorified Jerusalem makes her promiscuity all the more tragic.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. As you read this passage filled with strong imagery, what sort of emotions arise in you?
3. In what ways can we relate God's relationship with Jerusalem to our relationship with Jesus?
4. Think about God as your king, savior, parent, and lover. Which one are you most comfortable with? Least comfortable with? Why do you think that is?

Week 4, Day 3 – Read Ezekiel 16: 15-34

Understanding the Passage

Despite the "royal treatment" she has received, Jerusalem forgets where she came from and who it was that made her beautiful. Jerusalem plays the prostitute, offering herself to anyone who passes by. Yesterday we read that God passed by Jerusalem not once but twice. The first time saving her and the second time marrying her. These were life-giving and transforming events for Jerusalem, but she has chosen to forsake them and give herself away to destruction. Jerusalem uses God's wedding gifts to build up false Gods for herself and cheats on God with the nations around Jerusalem.

For centuries Israel and Judah had sought Egyptian assistance in warding off aggressive Mesopotamian powers. When the Assyrians and Babylonians came around, Judah was accused of attempting to appease them in order to save their own skins. The first time with the Assyrians it worked, but the result was different with the Babylonians. Jerusalem would often "hedge their bets" when danger came knocking, rather than trust in Yahweh for protection. They had forgotten who saved them and failed to trust God when it counted most.

In this passage God has the tone of a lover who has had his heart broken by his spouse's unfaithfulness. God appears angry and hurt almost as if he is lashing out through the prophet Ezekiel. It is important that we read the promiscuous imagery as metaphorical. Even though it makes a strong statement and conveys the depth of Jerusalem's sins, we would be missing the point if we got hung up on the sexual nature of the metaphor. While

most of the imagery is metaphorical, it is very possible that verses 20 and 21 are meant to be read literally. Sadly, child sacrifices to false gods were not unheard of during this time and may be an example of the depth of departure from God that the people had reached.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why do you think Ezekiel is being so graphic here? Do you find the imagery offensive?
3. When was a time in your life when you felt betrayed by someone? How did you feel? How did you respond?
4. Have you ever tried to “hedge your bets” when it came to trusting God?

Week 4, Day 4 – Read Ezekiel 16: 35-43

Understanding the Passage

In this passage we finally see the result of what will happen to Jerusalem after all it has done against the Lord. Yahweh will summon all of Jerusalem’s lovers, both friend and foe, and expose her nakedness to them. God is saying to Jerusalem, “You can have that which you have coveted and it will be to your own demise.” Instead of being loyal to God and trusting in him for their security and prosperity, Jerusalem has departed from God and will now face the consequences of her actions.

The violent imagery in this passage is troubling for the reader (in fact it has been quite a week for troubling imagery). Yahweh declares that in carrying out this punishment upon Jerusalem (the complete destruction of the city at the hands of the Babylonians), he has only returned the deeds of Jerusalem upon her own head. At some point, God allows us to lie in the bed we have made for ourselves. This passage is a reminder to the reader that our actions have real consequences both in our relationship with God and with the people around us.

Even in the heaviest of moments, God shows that he still loves his bride, Jerusalem. In verse 42, he promises that he will not remain angry at them forever. We might liken this to a parent who is forced to punish their child because that is the only way to get through to them. In the midst of a very serious and emotional lecture, the parent is moved to remind the child that they are still loved even though what they did was wrong. The punishment will be carried out, but afterwards they will be in right relationship again because the parent will always love the child.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Do the strong emotions that God shows over the course of chapter 16 make you uncomfortable?
3. When was a time where you felt metaphorically naked or exposed? What made you feel that way?
4. Have you ever had to discipline someone for their own good? What emotions did you experience in the process?

Week 4, Day 5 – Read Ezekiel 16: 59-63

Understanding the Passage

In this final section of Ezekiel’s lengthy oracle, the prophet finally brings this vision of Yahweh’s wanton wife to a bittersweet conclusion. Fundamental to all of Jerusalem’s abominations has been her failure to remember all that Yahweh has done for her. “You have not remembered how I saved you, you do not remember our oath to one another, you do not remember that you are my people and I am your God.” Yahweh, by contrast, states that after Jerusalem’s punishment, “I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth.” This act

of remembering motivates God to reestablish their eternal covenant. Jerusalem will also remember her ways and be ashamed when Judah is renewed. The two “sisters” in this passage likely is referring to Samaria and Sodom, two independent cities that will join Judah’s territory after the exile is over.

Yahweh reiterates in verse 62 that he will establish his covenant with Jerusalem “and you shall know that I am Yahweh.” When Jerusalem is able to truly recognize and acknowledge Yahweh’s sovereignty she will remember her past. She will be confounded and never open her mouth again because of her shame once Yahweh forgives all that she has done.

Throughout this difficult chapter the message has been loud and clear – the exile was a result of Jerusalem’s idolatry and not a failure on God’s part to protect his people. The people had forgotten who their God was and in the process forgotten who they were as well. But even in the most heated parts of Ezekiel we see a God who, even though angry and heartbroken, has not given up on his people. We may run away from God, forsaking our identity as his child or bride, but God will never stop pursuing us, calling us back home again.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Many Christians are tempted to skip over or outright ignore Ezekiel 16 altogether, what might be the danger of doing this?
3. Now that chapter 16 has come to an end, what questions linger in your heart about what you have read this week?
4. Are you ever in danger of “not remembering who God is in your life?” Today take some time to remember all that God has done for you.

Week 4: Questions for Weekly Discussion (based on video lesson, daily readings and reflections, and weekly sermon):

1. Of the daily Bible readings and reflections from this week, which one hit home for you, or provoked the most thoughts and questions?
2. After being sent into exile the people continued to turn away from God. Have you ever done something that you knew was wrong, felt guilty about it, but still continued to do it?
3. What might God be asking you to remove from your life that has become a stumbling block for you?
4. In what ways could we relate God’s relationship with Jerusalem to our relationship with Jesus?
5. Think about God as your king, savior, parent, and lover. Which one are you most comfortable with? Which are you least comfortable with? Why do you think that is?
6. When was a time in your life when you felt betrayed by someone? How did you feel? How did you respond?
7. Have you ever tried to “hedge your bets” when it came to trusting God? What do you hedge your bets on?
8. Do the strong emotions that God shows over the course of chapter 16 make you feel uncomfortable? Why do you think the imagery is so intense?
9. Many Christians are tempted to skip over or outright ignore Ezekiel 16 altogether, what might be the danger of doing this?
10. Are you ever in danger of “not remembering who God is in your life?” Today take some time to remember all that God has done for you.
11. This passage is designed to get our attention – what are the idols that you worship (family, stuff, money, etc.)?