



Week 5: Fire, Jerusalem Soup, and Hope

Week 5, Day 1 – Read Ezekiel 20:33-44

Understanding the Passage

Ezekiel 20 is a minor turning point in the book. Ezekiel 15-19 is all about graphic images of Israel's rebellion against God (remember the useless grapevine and the prostitute wife?). Ezekiel 20-23 is an explanatory thesis of their current historical situation. Ezekiel reminds the people of their own story of sin. He simply offers them the naked truth of their actions (especially their idolatry) and tells them of the immediate consequence: the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of most of Israel's population.

The hardest thing a prophet can do is to tell the truth about a people's track-record of sin. We would rather revision our own history and remember ourselves better than we actually were. It is a defense mechanism to protect ourselves from the necessary pain of guilt, but without remembering the truth we cannot change. And, if we do not change, then God loves us too much to do nothing. It is better to listen to the prophets in our lives, who remind us of our darker stories that we like to forget, so we have an opportunity to change before the consequences fall.

There are at least three pieces of the present passage that need unpacking.

1. Ezekiel is forecasting a time when God brings the exiles back to Jerusalem. These are *all* the exiles, not just the upper class who were exiled with Ezekiel, but also the surviving masses, the remnant, who will be carted off after Jerusalem falls. Ezekiel will repeatedly remind the people of this solid hope. Exile will not last forever.
2. Not all the exiles will make it back (see verse 38). Some of the exiles will settle in other lands that are not Israel. This is the *diaspora*, the scatter of the Jewish people around the world; we currently live in that diaspora. Ezekiel sees a day when some of the Jewish nation will choose not to live in the covenant that God will set up. They can choose to come back to the covenant or not.
3. The prerequisite to coming back to Jerusalem is reaffirming the old covenant between God and Israel as laid out in the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy). That is what the *staff* in verse 37 is about. The staff is like a ruler or measuring stick: the people will be judged, or held accountable, according to that stick.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Let's do a little review. What is a prophet in your own words?
3. Where is Ezekiel preaching? What major historical event is he predicting?
4. Why is the work of a prophet so challenging and potentially dangerous?
5. What are the darker truths in your past that you would like to forget?

Week 5, Day 2 – Read Ezekiel 22:17-31

Understanding the Passage

Sin is not only a problem individuals have; it is a sickness that societies have. Think of all the “isms” that plague American society: racism, sexism, classism, to name a few. These are social sins.

The Apostle Paul will one day call the church a body, a living physical organism. Israel is a body, our culture is a body, and bodies get sick. Sin is a sickness that communal bodies have to deal with before they harm the body beyond repair.

Ezekiel lists some of the diseases that Israel’s body never dealt with, so now God is going to deal with them (these are listed in order from verses 25-29):

- Political corruption
- Religious corruption
- Political leaders profiting off the death of their citizens
- False prophets telling the people what they want to hear
- Profiting of the poor
- Oppression of the poor and the resident alien

How will God deal with the sins of the people? Through purification by fire. Ezekiel calls Israel “dross”. Dross in metallurgy is the unwanted impurities that form on the surface of molten metal after melting down desired metals like silver, bronze, or iron. You cannot use dross. It is a byproduct of metal refining that cannot be refined anymore. It is throwaway stuff. Note that Ezekiel does not call Israel a fine metal to be purified *of* the unwanted stuff; they *are* the unwanted stuff. They are the social sin that God wants to toss out.

Ezekiel is saying, "God is coming to purify you like silver in a blacksmith's smelter. Most of what makes you *you* will be burned off. Only the good stuff will remain." Fire in the Bible has that kind of cleansing effect. Fire purifies. Fire eliminates the throwaway material in your soul and leaves only the pure, good silver.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What is the difference between individual sin and social sin?
3. Name a few of the social sins in our culture (or the church!) today.
4. John the Baptist will one day preach, “There is one coming who will baptize, not with water, but with fire and Spirit.” After reading Ezekiel 22, what do you think John is saying?

Week 5, Day 3 – Read Ezekiel 24:1-14

Understanding the Passage

The time has come. The horrible moment Ezekiel predicted has arrived. The Babylonians have laid siege to Jerusalem.

Siege is a slow and terrifying thing. Imagine being trapped in a city. All the roads in and out have been blocked. Supplies cannot come in. Food cannot come in. Sure, there is food to be harvested outside the city, but the soldiers on the roads will not allow the food to pass through the city’s gates. Now you are hungry, and your children are hungry. The hunger lingers for months. Now people are dying. The soldiers who were supposed to protect the city are also dying, or too malnourished to fight. It is hell on earth.

The Babylonians did not destroy Jerusalem in a day; they starved the people out over months. Then, when the people were too weak to put up a fight, only then did they enter the city, torch it, and reduce the city to ashes; including the Temple.

Ezekiel preaches the sermon about the boiling pot on or around the day the siege began. Chapter 24 is like reading the work of a journalist who delivers breaking news hundreds of miles away from the tragic event itself, but he is reporting to people whose families are the victims in the heat of this bad news. Ezekiel likens Jerusalem to a cauldron or a big pot: the choicest meat (or the Jerusalemites), are added to the pot, and the fire (or the siege), is lit beneath the pot to reduce the meat to a heap of nothing.

And once the pot is empty, the fire should get hotter so the rust can burn off. The rust symbolizes the sin of the people. Pots can accumulate food deposits over time, the stuff that neither hands nor the dishwasher can scrub off. Cast iron pots develop rust from water that sits too long in the pot. The sin of Jerusalem is like old moldy food or brown rust you cannot scrub off. You can only burn it off. And now, the fires have been lit.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What year did Jerusalem fall? (You may have to look this one up, or refer to week 1.)
3. Why was siege such a horrific thing?
4. Why do you think Ezekiel calls the citizens of Jerusalem the “choicest meat” and not simply “meat?”

Week 5, Day 4 – Read Ezekiel 28:24-26

Understanding the Passage

One of the more overlooked functions of a prophet was their commentary on international politics. Modern readers should not be fooled by the absence of light-speed telecommunications in antiquity. Nations like Israel and Babylon, Assyria and Egypt were in constant contact; some, as is the case with Israel and Babylon, were vassal states of the other, meaning they paid tribute to the ruling empire, which required frequent messages and travel. Prophets would hear of the arrangements made by these world powers and offer God’s opinion.

For example, repeatedly in Ezekiel does the prophet call Israel a “rebellious house.” He is referring to King Zedekiah’s refusal to pay tribute to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It was seen as an act of rebellion against Babylon and directly led to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, and the public execution of Zedekiah. It is Ezekiel’s job to preach on God’s attitude about such things (see Ezekiel 21:25-27). Had Zedekiah not refused to pay tribute, then maybe, just maybe, Jerusalem would have been saved.

All this is important to the present passage because Ezekiel is forecasting a time when the exiles will dwell in the Promised Land once again, safe and secure, not just from Babylon, but from Israel’s immediate neighbors. Nations like Moab and Ammon conspired against Israel and worked with the Babylonians when they first attacked Jerusalem. These neighboring nations became friends of the enemy, which made them enemies. Ezekiel is looking forward to a new day when Israel’s neighbors are friends, not enemies, and the returned exiles can sleep peacefully, confident that their neighbors will not turn against them.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why would Ezekiel (and God) have disagreed with King Zedekiah’s decision not to pay tribute to Babylon?
3. Why did Ezekiel preach against nations like Moab and Ammon?
4. Why would prophets concern themselves with international politics?

Week 5, Day 5 – Read Ezekiel 33:10-16

Understanding the Passage

Like many preachers, Ezekiel has a bad habit of using a dozen words when half-a-dozen would do. His message in today's passage, though packaged in more material than one might think necessary, is really quite simple: past sin does not void present repentance, and past righteousness does not erase present sin.

The latter is easier to understand. Our good deeds from yesterday do not mean today's sin did not happen. It did happen, but we, like Israel, would prefer to rest on our laurels. We would like to think our long histories of good conduct can sweep away our brief moments of hatred and bitterness and apathy. But, the victim of one moment of violence does not care about the ten years the victimizer had a clean slate. There must be justice for that one moment. It is up to the victimizer to face the truth and ask forgiveness. It is grace, not past righteousness, that can make the slate clean again.

But the harder word, the one we all need to hear before Easter Sunday, is this: God's forgiveness is always available to you, a sinner, who would reach out and claim it, no matter how unworthy you think you are. We think the cumulative weight of our sin, like a garbage heap, is too heavy and too rotten for forgiveness to reach the soul beneath it. We think repentance is all well and good for people who have a more innocent past that they can easily put behind them. But that is not the case for people like us who have been around the block a time or two, did things we regret, things we cannot just forget, things that make repentance sound like gold at the end of the rainbow, something beautiful you wish could be true but just cannot be.

But it is true. Forgiveness is always available to you. It is there for the receiving. Repentance is simply the turning around of one's life in response to the free forgiveness of God. Ezekiel, like Jesus after him, desperately wants his people to believe that God really is that good. Our past only gets to define us if we let it, because the truth is, it is grace that defines us – whether we want it or not.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Summarize today's passage in your own words.
3. Just before this passage, God calls Ezekiel a sentinel, one who stands watch. What is Ezekiel watching for?
4. Why is hard to remind people of their need to ask forgiveness for past mistakes? Why is hard to remind people of their need to let go of past mistakes?

Week 5: 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. In chapter 20, why would God require the returning exiles to pass under a staff, or be held accountable to a covenant, before they re-entered the Promised Land?
3. What is the difference between individual sin and social sin? What are social sins in our culture today?
4. What do the boiling pot and rust/scum symbolize in chapter 24?
5. Referring to chapter 28, why would the exiles want to be assured of safety from Israel's neighboring nations?
6. When have you felt like your life was a copper pot over the fire, a time when you were tested but, in the process, made stronger?
7. What scum still exists in your life? What do you need the Spirit to burn off from your soul?

Notes, Reflections, and Prayers: