

## **“Vomited from the Land”**

**Ezekiel 22:1-16**

**February 1, 2009**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Once again, if we are to understand Ezekiel’s prophecy, we must know something of where it fits within Israel’s history. Let’s review again the broad outline of this history, which begins with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Though God promised them a land, they never received this promise during their lifetimes. The entire clan moved to Egypt under the leadership of Jacob’s son, Joseph. They stayed there for 400 years until Pharaoh enslaved them and mistreated them so severely that they cried out to God for deliverance. God sent Moses to do that, and under his leadership they left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their unbelief. Joshua succeeded Moses and led them into the Promised Land, where they were led by a series of judges for 300 years. They asked for a king, and God gave them a united monarchy for only 120 years, led by three kings who each reigned for forty years—Saul, David and Solomon. The nation split after Solomon into north and south. The northern kingdom, Israel, had nothing but bad kings until the Assyrians conquered them in 722 B.C. Judah, the southern kingdom, had some bad kings and some good ones, until they were conquered by the Babylonians in a series of conquests beginning in 597 and ending in the complete destruction of the city and temple in 586 B.C. Ezekiel, along with King Jehoiachin and other leading citizens, were taken into exile in 597. Ezekiel has brought God’s word to them already, saying that things will get much worse. The exile from Jerusalem to Babylon will expand to include even larger groups of people, and it will last a long time, and Jerusalem will be destroyed, along with its temple.

The phrase that forms the title of this sermon, being vomited from the land, describes this exile to Babylon. Though it is not a phrase that occurs in our passage, it is a biblical phrase. In Leviticus 18:28, Israel is told not to make themselves unclean by their sins, **“lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.”** Many in Israel had concluded that this could never happen. They were convinced that God would never bring such judgment upon them, because it would be unfair for him to do so. The conclusion about God not bringing judgment is quite familiar to us all. Many in our day believe that people are basically good, and that God would be wrong to bring judgment. Judah felt the same way in Ezekiel’s day, and this chapter is one in which God justifies his judgment. Judah believed that God would be unfair to judge them. Ezekiel believed that God would be unholy *not* to judge them. Ezekiel’s words here are not unlike the prosecuting attorney making his concluding arguments for the guilt of the accused. He makes essentially three charges against Israel that make it necessary for God to bring judgment. Remember that the same three sins will bring judgment in our own day as well.

## I. The Forgetting of God

The root of the nation's problem is stated in verse 12. They were busily engaged in making money, even to the point of extorting their neighbors, **“but me you have forgotten, declares the Lord.”** Though this is the root of the problem, it seems to most people to be only a minor problem. What's the harm in forgetting God? Sometimes we get busy and preoccupied with other pressing matters, and simply neglect to think about God or pay much attention to him. Surely this is not a big enough problem to warrant the kind of judgment God announces in this passage. Or is it? Is forgetting God a small problem or a big one? There are two reasons the forgetting of God is such a big problem, the first of which we will cover in this point and the second in the next point.

The first reason this is a big sin requires us to see something of the special relationship God intended between Israel and himself as indicated by their relationship to the land. In Israel, all the land was owned by God. The laws did not allow for the permanent sale of any land belonging to a family. Technically, it didn't really belong to the family in the way of absolute ownership. So, like someone subletting an apartment, you could rent your land to someone else for a few years but you could never sell it permanently. The reason is that the Jews didn't own their land—God did. The emphasis with the land is on the relationship God would have there with his people. Listen to what the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* says about the land.

The often repeated description of the land as ‘flowing with milk and honey’ reveals that the land which the Israelites are about to enter is a new paradise... this is a theological rather than an agricultural point; Israel's land is so good because it is the long-awaited gift of God in fulfillment of his promise. The promise of land guarantees the restoration of intimacy with God in terms which recall the description of Eden (p. 623).

God declared that it would be in this place that he would have a relationship with his people. This is where God lived. It's called the “Holy Land” because the holy God had chosen to live in it. Since the land is made holy by God's presence there, the Canaanites who lived in the land before Israel's arrival were vomited out of the land (Lev. 18:28). But now Israel was acting like the Canaanites before them. They had forgotten about this special relationship with God in the land. But God is holy, and he must do what is right, which required at this point that Israel be removed from the land just as the Canaanites before them. Indeed, their removal was to be like a vomiting, as if some dreadful and poisonous thing has been eaten so that the stomach wretches and forces it out.

Let me say this differently. Israel had forgotten God by becoming preoccupied with the gift of the land instead of the Giver. They wanted God's stuff, but not God himself. This is especially seen in the violation of the Sabbath laws. **“You have despised my holy things and profaned my Sabbaths”** (v. 8). There were

several different Sabbaths in the Old Testament. We are all familiar with the weekly Sabbath. But there was also the sabbatical year once every seven years and the Sabbath of sabbatical years in the 50<sup>th</sup> Year of Jubilee. The sabbatical year every seventh year was to be a year when crops were not planted in the fields. The same thing was to happen at the fiftieth year, which happened after the seventh sabbatical year, making it a Sabbath of all Sabbaths. These Sabbath laws were intended, among other things, to build a heart of trust within Israel. If you can't plant your crops one year, then you have to trust God for his provision. Then imagine how much more challenging that would be during the Year of Jubilee, the fiftieth year that followed a sabbatical year. For two straight years, the 49<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> years, crops were not planted. The clear message is that holiness requires trust in God. If they were to live in God's holy land, they must trust God by observing his Sabbaths.

There's an interesting verse in 2 Chronicles about this connection between the Sabbath years and the exile. We read of the exile in Babylon, that it was **“to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years”** (2 Chron. 36:21). They had skipped seventy sabbatical years, and God says he will now give rest to the land through the exile.

Let's pause for an application before moving on. Have you remembered to trust God? Or have you forgotten him in the midst of a hectic life of self-trust? Have you responded to the current economic challenges by a new round of worry or activity, all the while forgetting to take your needs to God? In sending Judah into exile for forgetting God, he is saying to us that remembering to trust him is of supreme importance.

## II. The Breakdown of Society

The breakdown of society flows from the first sin of forgetting God and supplies us with a second reason that forgetting God is such a problem. It is that forgetting God leads to sins against other people. Ungodliness leads to unrighteousness. The connection between these two makes sense. Those who are willing to use God through wanting his gifts but not wanting him, will not hesitate to use other people for their selfish purposes. That's what we read of in verses 6-12, which describe a variety of sins which can be traced back to violations of laws contained in several chapters in Leviticus. Most of the sins listed here describe a disintegration of society. In a disintegrating society, there is contempt for the authority established by God. We read here, **“Father and mother are treated with contempt in you”** (v. 7). A disintegrating society is one in which “might makes right,” where the powerful rule over the weak for selfish purposes. So the **“sojourner suffers extortion in your midst.”** The sojourner is the stranger in the land, the one with no connections and no family to help him. Israel was commanded to show special kindness to such people, remembering that they themselves were once sojourners in Egypt. Instead of showing kindness, now they

are extorting what little these sojourners have. Others who are weak also suffer in this disintegrating society. **“The fatherless and the widow are wronged in you”** (v. 7). **“They have oppressed the poor and the needy”** (v. 29).

The most prominent theme of these verses that speak of the social breakdown of the society is the theme of violence, indicated by the repetition of the word “blood.” Jerusalem is the **“city that sheds blood in her midst”** (v. 3). It is paired with idolatry in this verse because Israel, influenced by the nations surrounding them, adopted the practice of child sacrifice. That’s what Ezekiel is referring to in the chapter we’re going to look at in two weeks. **“They have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me”** (23:37). The nation’s rulers **“have been bent on shedding blood”** (v. 6). **“There are men in you who slander to shed blood”** (9), and others who **“take bribes to shed blood”** (v. 12). Blood was treated as something special in Israel. Because it represented life, the shedding of innocent blood had a special ability to defile the land. Blood is even given a voice that calls out to God. So when Cain murders his brother, Abel, God says, **“The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground”** (Gen. 4:10). The blood cries out to God for justice.

When we forget God, a process begins that leads to the disintegration of individuals, of families and of society. You may have heard that the great novelist John Updike died this past week. I couldn’t resist reading one of Updike’s novels several years ago, because it was about a Presbyterian pastor named Clarence Wilmot. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* traces the disintegration that follows from an abandonment of God. Clarence Wilmot is reading a theology book one day when he comes to the conclusion that there is no God. The book then proceeds to trace the disintegration that takes place through four generations of Wilmots. It is something of a commentary on the religious life of America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a century where secularism grew and God was pushed to the margins. It is not coincidental that this same century has been called the bloody century. And it is not surprising that the greatest bloodshed in our nation today is perpetrated against those least able to defend themselves, babies inside the womb.

### **III. The Failure of Leadership**

A failing society can best be understood as one in which there has been the widespread failure of leadership. The last part of this chapter traces the failure of Judah’s leadership across the entire spectrum. There is a failure of the priesthood (v. 26), those who are supposed to teach the law and maintain the distinction between the holy and the common. But they have completely failed in their duty. The rulers have also failed (v. 27). They have been crooked politicians, caring only for their own gain and being willing to destroy others in order to get it. The prophets should have held the line and spoken out against the priests and the rulers, but they too failed (v. 28). They cooperated in the conspiracy, smearing whitewash for the rulers and priests, saying that what they were doing was fine and claiming to speak for God as they did so. Finally, the people joined in the

corruption, practicing extortion and committing robbery (v. 29). Every man for himself was the theme of all. The leaders had led, so that others followed their example. The leaders had abused their power for selfish gain, and now everyone was getting in on the act. Everyone was finding someone weaker and abusing them for selfish gain.

Any one of these four groups (priests, rulers, prophets or people), had they been faithful and held the line of faithfulness, could have arrested the decline of their society. But none were faithful. Ezekiel writes these dark words: **“I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none”** (v. 30). If you had to summarize the teaching of the Bible in two statements, this verse would have to be included as part of the first statement. In his sin, man has forgotten God, leading to the judgment of God as he allows the disintegration of everything, and there is no one who can stop it. The second statement, though, is that what man could not provide for himself, God has provided. Since no one could be found to stand in the gap and bring the much-needed deliverance, God sent his own Son to provide this deliverance. I like the way the writer of Hebrews words this. In referring to the significance of the blood in establishing human guilt, as we have already seen, he says that it is also significant in providing our freedom. He says that when we come to faith in Jesus, we come **“to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel”** (12:24). Abel’s blood cried for revenge, while Jesus’ for forgiveness.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I want to close with two applications that stem from the title of Updike’s book that I referred to earlier. That title comes from one of the stanzas of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. “In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me. As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, while God is marching on.” First, no matter how frightening you may find it, accept the rightness of God’s judgment. Our deliverance comes not from trying to escape judgment in our way, but in God’s way. Our way is through trying to escape our guilt by denial or defensiveness. God’s way is through confessing our guilt in repentance and faith. God’s way brings the joyful freedom of transparency and a cleansed conscience. This is what transforms us.

The second application is to take leadership as those who are willing to give themselves for others. We are to bless our society through leading as Jesus’ transformed people. Through him, we are equipped to give our lives for others rather than using leadership to take from others for ourselves. We are to take leadership both in the church and in our society. We do so not to bring acclaim to ourselves, but to bring the freedom and justice of Christ’s kingdom to all.