

“A Tale of Two Cities”
Ezekiel 23:1-49
February 15, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

This is one of the most shocking stories told in the Bible. Even by the more lax standards of sexual morality in our own culture, the behavior of the two sisters featured in this story is shocking. These two sisters are married women who decide to undertake a career outside the home. The career they choose is the ancient one of prostitution. The two sisters represent the capital cities of the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Oholah is the name of the sister who represents Samaria, the capital city of Israel. She plays the whore with the nation of Assyria, and it doesn't end well for her. Her lover, Assyria, doesn't treat her well, killing her with the sword (v. 10). Her sister, Oholibah, represents Jerusalem, capital of Judah. Amazingly, even though she sees what happens to her sister, she proceeds to do the same thing, with similar results. Her lovers, Assyria and Babylon, turn against her and deal with her cruelly. **“They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword”** (v. 25).

Stories such as this one are not unusual in the writings of the prophets. Probably the most famous prophetic story is the one the prophet Nathan told to King David after David's adultery with Bathsheba and his subsequent attempt to cover the sin through the murder of her husband, Uriah. Nathan realized that it probably wouldn't work just to walk up to the king and tell him that he needed to repent of his sin. Instead of such a “front door” approach, he would need to come in through the side door. So Nathan tells David a story of a rich man and a poor man. The rich man owns many flocks and herds, but the poor man has only one little lamb, who is more a member of the family than a farm animal. The poor man even lets the lamb drink from his cup. One day a traveler comes to visit the rich man, and instead of taking a lamb from his own flock to provide for his visitor, the rich man steals the lamb belonging to the poor man and slaughters it in order to feed his guest. Nathan's “side door” approach works. After David's anger is kindled against the rich man for his cruel and abusive behavior, the penny drops as Nathan declares to David, “You are the man” (2 Sam. 12:7).

God's entrance into our lives is often through the side door. Though he is God and should be welcomed in through the front door, our defensiveness and blindness often prevent him from coming in that way. But God is full of mercy, and when the front door is locked to his entrance, he comes around to the servants' entrance and humbly enters in that way. The story of the two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah is the humble entrance of God into Judah's life. They would not have tolerated a front door message from Ezekiel in which he would openly rebuke them for their sin. So God comes more subtly, in the form of a story. As we look at this story today, I would like for us to do so with a view to God coming

into our lives with his power and encouragement. The key for that happening is to receive the story he is telling and place ourselves in the story.

I. The Wrong Stories We Tell

Though Ezekiel's story includes both Israel and Judah, his audience is clearly the southern kingdom of Judah. He was a member of that kingdom and is now living in exile in Babylon with others who have been citizens of Judah. I won't review the entire Old Testament history of Israel, but let me remind you of a couple of relevant points in that history. Remember that Israel was a united monarchy for only 120 years, until the year 930 when King Solomon died and the kingdom split into a northern and southern kingdom. It is now around 590 B.C., 340 years later. Though there had been times when the two nations of Israel and Judah lived together peacefully, there were other times when warfare broke out between them. But that all ended in 722 when the Assyrians conquered Israel and took them into exile. Everyone in Judah knew why the northern kingdom of Israel experienced this demise. They were a wicked nation whose worship of Jehovah had been corrupted because the temple of God was located in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. Since the division of the kingdom after Solomon, all of Israel's kings had been evil rulers.

As Ezekiel tells his story to his fellow Judean exiles, heads are nodding approvingly during the story of Oholah, the sister who represents Samaria, capital city of Israel. She was an idolater, given to adulterous relationships with Assyria instead of trusting in God. There was nothing new in this for Judah—everyone knew of the sin of Israel. That's why she had been judged by being taken into exile by Assyria. As Ezekiel moves to tell the story of her sister, Oholibah, representing Jerusalem, capital city of Judah, Ezekiel's hearers thought they knew how this story was going to turn out as well. Even the name of this sister, Oholibah, reassured them of the expected story line. This name means "My tent is in her," with the tent being the temple of God. So the story they were expecting was something of a Cinderella story that would read like this. "For over two-hundred years, Oholibah had been persecuted by her more powerful older sister. But she remained faithful to her Lord, and was eventually rewarded. Oholah, the older sister, got what was coming to her, and Oholibah was delivered by the hand of the God to whom she had remained faithful. Though she was a small nation, she looked to the Lord and he delivered her."

But that was not the story Ezekiel told. We get an indication of how this story will go in verse 11. **"Her sister Oholibah saw this, and she became more corrupt than her sister in her lust and in her whoring, which was worse than that of her sister."** We're going to look more carefully at the story of Oholibah in our next point, but for now I want to make one simple point. We all have in our minds a story of our lives that forms our identity and the place of God in our lives. Faith in God requires that we tell ourselves the right story, and unbelief means to live in the wrong story. All wrong stories follow a similar plot, in which

we are cast either as the victim or the hero. For example, I was talking to a pastor this week who was telling me his story of woe. In that story, he saw himself as being the victim of a no-win situation. On one side, he was feeling pressure from a particular group to act in one way, while another group was applying pressure to act in a contrary way. He then looked at me in desperation and asked, "What am I supposed to do?" He didn't really want an answer from me, and I wasn't really sure what to tell him even if he had wanted an answer. But as I reflected on this conversation later, it occurred to me that he was the wrong character in the wrong story. He was playing the victim in a story in which God had allowed him to be in a situation where he had only two bad choices.

In other cases, we position ourselves in a story where we are the hero. That's what Judah had been doing in Ezekiel's day, as they saw themselves being the faithful remnant of God's people. We often do the same thing. For example, a husband works hard in providing for his family and does a pretty good job of it. But his wife wants more from him. He tunes out when he comes home and remains emotionally distant from her as he spends his time at home on the computer or the television. As his wife asks him for more, he begins to see himself as the victim of her demands and as heroically getting up and going to work to provide for his family, while being weighed down by her demands.

What's so wrong about being the victim or the hero? Both of these roles cut us off from God. Both of these roles have the effect that is stated in verse 35. **"You have forgotten me and cast me behind your back."** The victim acts as if there is no God to help. The only actors in the story with any power are his victimizers, and not even God can deliver against their great power. The hero sees himself as being able to deliver by his own efforts. Everyone else may fail, but he will be true to the end and will eventually be seen as right. And how sweet he imagines that day to be when he is vindicated for all to see! Whether he is the victim, hero, or a little of both, God is not present in this story. There is no room for him. Either my victimizers are too powerful for him, or, in the case of the hero, I don't need God's help because I am able to handle it myself.

II. The Right Story God Tells

If the wrong story keeps God out of our lives, he comes in through the right story. That's the one Ezekiel tells here. In the right story, I am neither a victim nor a hero, but a sinner in need of God's grace. In Ezekiel's story, Judah is a greater sinner than her sister. Oholibah's sin is greater because she had the benefit of seeing her sister's sin, as well as its outcome, and yet still sinned herself. **"Oholibah saw this, and she became more corrupt than her sister in her lust and in her whoring, which was worse than that of her sister"** (v. 11). And her sin was greater because her adultery was with two lovers, not just one. She got in bed both with Assyria and Babylon.

When Ezekiel talks about the whoring of these two sisters, he is obviously speaking metaphorically. What is the exact sin of which the two nations of Israel and Judah were guilty? A hint is given later in the chapter when he says, **“you played the whore with the nations and defiled yourself with their idols”** (v. 30). And then he says, **“with their idols they have committed adultery”** (v. 37). They were guilty of trusting in other gods instead of trusting in the true God, Jehovah. 2 Kings 16 tells us exactly what happened. Ahaz was king of Judah at the time, and he was attacked by a coalition of two more powerful nations, Israel and Syria. He was able to hold them off, but just barely, and their invasion was somewhat successful in that they were able to take back some of Judah’s land. And then we read these words: **“So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.’ Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king’s house and sent a present to the king of Assyria”** (16:7-8). Ahaz’s plea for help from Assyria worked, at least politically. Assyria attacked Syria, killed its king, drove them out of Judah, and delivered Judah from its troubles.

What strikes me about this incident is how natural it seems to us. It was a political problem for which Ahaz found a political solution. But God’s perspective on it was not so benign. He regarded it as a violation of the very heart of Judah’s relationship with him. Judah was to trust God for deliverance from their enemies, not to go off and look elsewhere for help. Ahaz should have done what his ancestor, King Jehoshaphat had done when threatened by a coalition of nations who were invading Judah. **“Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord”** (2 Chron. 20:3). And then he prayed to God and reminded him of his promise. He concluded his prayer with these words: **“For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you”** (20:12). He trusted God, and God brought a great deliverance on that day. Ahaz failed to trust God, and God viewed it as spiritual adultery. When we trust in anything other than God, it is a betrayal at the heart of the relationship, just as adultery is for marriage.

There is no help for us until we accept God’s story. This is not the story Judah wanted to hear. Isn’t it a bit of an overreaction to view as spiritual prostitution this sin of looking to a nation for help? How have you responded to the difficulties that come from living in a fallen world? In a world where investments lose their value, employees lose jobs, loved ones get sick and cars and houses break and need expensive repairs, do you trust God or do you look to Assyria? Do you pray and say with Jehoshaphat, “I don’t know what to do, but my eyes are on you?” The failure to trust God is spiritual adultery; it is inviting another god into our marital bed.

III. The Rest of the Story

The story Ezekiel tells ends in judgment. The last words of the chapter summarize this judgment: **“You shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry”** (v. 49). Earlier in the chapter, this judgment was likened to drinking from the cup of judgment. They will drink a cup of “horror and desolation.” **“You shall drink it and drain it out, and gnaw its shards.”** They will go beyond drinking every last drop of the wine of judgment, and will eat the cup itself. This imagery of drinking from a cup of judgment is a common one in the Old Testament. The judgment of God is likened to drinking strong wine until one gets drunk. Drunkenness progresses in the same way that judgment does. People begin drinking confident of their power to handle the wine, but eventually are mastered by it. And when it masters them, all human dignity is lost. This loss of dignity is indicated in the language of verse 32. **“You shall drink your sister’s cup that is deep and large; you shall be laughed at and held in derision, for it contains much.”**

Ezekiel’s story ends in judgment upon idolatrous Judah, but that is not the end of the story. For the end, we have to go to the New Testament, where we read that Jesus drank this cup of judgment. In the garden of Gethsemane, just before his crucifixion, he prayed like this: **“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will”** (Luke 26:39). It was the Father’s will that Jesus should drink the cup of judgment, and by doing so the ocean of judgment we deserve has been emptied completely. There is no judgment remaining for us. The cup remaining for us is the cup of feasting, which Jesus spoke of on the same night he spoke of the cup of judgment. **“I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom”** (Luke 26:29). We cannot put ourselves in God’s story as the sinners we are until we are confident that there is healing and forgiveness for sinners in Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

This is the story of our lives. As we trust ourselves instead of God, we are committing spiritual adultery. We are not victims or heroes, but sinners. But because we are sinners, there is help for us in Jesus, who came to rescue sinners, not victims or heroes. As we acknowledge our sin and trust in him, we find a new ability to trust God in all areas of life. There is a marvelous passage in Psalm 115, where we read these words. **“O Israel, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield”** (v. 9-11). As our helper, God has access to places where we have none. If you have financial needs, he can provide the kind of help you need. And he is our shield. A shield stays close to us and takes the blows that would otherwise come to us. Place yourself in this story and learn to trust God. He is your help and your shield.