

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

“Local Prophet Hair-lifted to Jerusalem”

8:1-18

After every disaster it's customary to survey the damage. Whether its a hurricane, or a tornado, or an earthquake, or a fire, we each can recall some image or images of the damage.

Ezekiel is taken on a kind of damage survey. In a vision he finds himself at the Temple in Jerusalem. In his case the damage to be surveyed was still in progress. It was a spiritual damage being wrought against the Temple of God in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 8:1 And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there.

Chapter eight begins a new section of the book. Through chapter eleven Ezekiel will be given a new set of visions. In them he will be shown the condition of the Jews back in Judah.

The second siege by Babylon taught them nothing with regard to the fear of the Lord. Instead of repenting and seeking the Lord they fell deeper into idolatry.

It was around September of 592BC. Ezekiel could recall the exact date. We talk about knowing where you were on, say, the day Neil Armstrong took one small step for man, one giant step for mankind.

You probably have a few spiritual dates like that - dates on which God met you in a very special way.

The “elders” came to Ezekiel. It’s a good sign when leaders are seeking the word of God.

It’s also good for them to seek a word *from* God - which would be more technically accurate to what they were doing. With God’s inerrant authoritative Word to anchor us, we need to be seeking direction from Him. Where does He want to lead? What doors is He opening, and which are shut or shutting?

We are a people of the Word *and* the Spirit. It is not being led by God, by His Spirit, to simply determine decisions and direction based on our own wisdom. God still speaks.

Ezekiel 8:2 Then I looked, and there was a likeness, like the appearance of fire - from the appearance of His waist and downward, fire; and from His waist and upward, like the appearance of brightness, like the color of amber.

If you’re a comic book reader you can’t help but think of the Human Torch. “*Flame on!*”

In verse four Ezekiel will let us know that this is the same Person he saw in chapter one. It is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ - albeit a very unusual one. He was almost fully on fire but not quite - indicating His judgment was near but not quite yet.

Ezekiel 8:3 He stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the north gate of the inner court, where the seat of the image of jealousy was, which provokes to jealousy.

This is why I say Ezekiel was “hair-lifted” to Jerusalem.

Some say this was literal - that Ezekiel was literally picked-up by his hair and physically transported. Others point out the emphasis on it being “visions” of God.

Either way, it was real. Whether physically or spiritually, Ezekiel was transferred to these scenes.

What is “the image of jealousy... which provokes to jealousy?”

Ezekiel 8:4 And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the plain.

Ezekiel 8:5 Then He said to me, "Son of man, lift your eyes now toward the north." So I lifted my eyes toward the north, and there, north of the altar gate, was this image of jealousy in the entrance.

Ezekiel 8:6 Furthermore He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel commits here, to make Me go far away from My sanctuary? Now turn again, you will see greater abominations."

The Jews had constructed an image, an idol, right in the Temple at the "door of the north gate of the inner court." It provoked the Lord to jealousy because, as He said, "the glory of the God of Israel was there" in the Temple.

It would be like an adulterer bringing home his adulteress to have sex while the wife watched. It was a "great abomination" that would eventuate in the Lord going "far away from [His] sanctuary."

Maybe the fact that the idol was placed near the inner court made it somehow seem more acceptable. Christians sometimes become enamored with worldly or even cultic practices. Instead of rejecting them, they bring them in to the church and give them credibility.

The Lord still sees it as abominable.

As bad as their having set up an idol, things were far worse.

Ezekiel 8:7 So He brought me to the door of the court; and when I looked, there was a hole in the wall.

Ezekiel 8:8 Then He said to me, "Son of man, dig into the wall"; and when I dug into the wall, there was a door.

Ezekiel 8:9 And He said to me, "Go in, and see the wicked abominations which they are doing there."

Ezekiel 8:10 So I went in and saw, and there - every sort of creeping thing, abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed all around on the walls.

This was the original 'Hole in the Wall Gang.'

Let's talk briefly about the "hole in the wall." It may not seem like much, but it indicates that the Temple was in disrepair. They had time to build an idol but overlooked the upkeep of the Temple.

Our spiritual adornment ought to be priority one. Anything and everything physical should come after the spiritual man or woman is cared for.

Even though our emphasis is on the spiritual, the physical things God provides us ought to reflect our passion for Him, too. There's nothing wrong with keeping the church clean and inviting. I've performed weddings at too many churches that are just a mess.

The idea of Ezekiel digging a hole and discovering a "door" indicates that this was a sort of 'secret' activity in an area kept somewhat private.

On the walls he saw representations of "creeping thing[s] [and] abominable beasts." Commentators are almost universal in saying this was a form of worship borrowed from Egypt.

Egypt was the place the Hebrews were held captive for four hundred years. Now in a sense they returned to Egypt, to what they had been delivered from.

If you were saved later in life chances are there are a few things you were delivered from. If you were saved at a young age you might not have ever gotten enslaved to certain habits. Still, you could say you were 'delivered' from them in the sense you were kept from being enslaved.

Does it make any sense to return to those things? Or to turn to them? No, it doesn't. But we can do it anyone, against good spiritual sense.

Ezekiel 8:11 And there stood before them seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, and in their midst stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan. Each man had a censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense went up.

The Jewish Sanhedrin, the ruling council, isn't formed until after the Babylonian captivity. These are the "seventy... elders," the men who represented Israel.

"Incense" represents prayers ascending to God. These guys were praying instead to the gods of Egypt. They were prayerless and even worse than prayerless.

These seventy men ought to have been seeking God on behalf of the people. Instead, as a group, they were dabbling with the things that would bring Israel into bondage.

“Shaphan” is mentioned. He was the scribe who had read the rediscovered Book of the Law to King Josiah. It was that activity that fueled a reform and a revival.

Now his offspring, “Jaazaniah,” stood in the midst of the seventy elders. He may have been some sort of leader among them, someone they looked to for insight into these Egyptian gods and practices. If there is a correlation to Shaphan, it could be that Jaazaniah was reciting to them how to worship Egypt-style.

Christians are often led astray by those who ought to know better. They are led astray by those who come from a strong tradition but now deny it and open themselves up to all manner of spiritual junk.

Ezekiel 8:12 Then He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols? For they say, 'The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.' "

Some have interpreted this verse to mean that each of the seventy was doing this at home, in secret. It seems more likely to indicate that in this secret fellowship hall they each had their favorite “idol.”

Their newfound theology was “the Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.” The first phrase diminishes God while the second accuses Him.

They diminished God by saying “the Lord does not see us.” If He didn’t see them then He was not omnipresent. Lose one of the ‘omni’s’ and you lose them all - omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience.

The term “omnipresence” is borrowed from Latin. It is a compound of *omni*, meaning “all,” and *praesens*, meaning “here.” Thus, God is always here, close to everything, next to everyone.

Again, the term “omniscience” is borrowed from Latin. It is also a compound of *omni*, meaning “all,” and *scienta*, meaning “knowledge.” God is perfect in knowledge and knows everything that can be known throughout all of time.

As with the other ‘omni’ terms, “omnipotence” is a Latin compound of *omni*, meaning “all,” and *potens*, meaning “power.” God’s omnipotence means that God is able to do accomplish all his holy will.

Be wary of any teaching that diminishes in any way the presence or the knowledge or the power of God.

“The Lord has forsaken the land” is an accusation. It accuses God of breaking His promises to Israel. It was a reaction to their subjection and suffering.

Notice how one-sided it is as an accusation. Yes, God made them unconditional promises regarding the land. He is still keeping those promises today! Israel is back in her land - even though the Hebrews still have not repented and turned to their Messiah, Jesus Christ.

There were also conditional promises. Disobedience would bring discipline.

The supposed problem of suffering is an argument, an accusation, that is frequently raised against God. It does not take into account man’s free will and the entrance of sin into the universe by the exercise of that free will.

What is the answer to the accusation? Take a long look at Jesus. He came and suffered as a man to overcome sin. He suffered and died that you and I might live.

Why does suffering continue? Because God is not willing that any should perish but rather that all would come to repentance. Suffering continues because God delays His judgment upon sin waiting for more to be saved.

Ezekiel 8:13 And He said to me, "Turn again, and you will see greater abominations that they are doing."

Ezekiel 8:14 So He brought me to the door of the north gate of the Lord's house; and to my dismay, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz.

This is the only mention of “Tammuz” in the Bible. From what I can gather he was a Babylonian agriculture and fertility god. He was thought to die each autumn and winter and then return to life each spring - following the course of nature. It was the time of year that, in their worship of Tammuz, the women ritually wept at his demise.

“Weeping” wasn’t all that took place. Vile and immoral sexual practices accompanied the worship of Tammuz.

Ezekiel 8:15 Then He said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? Turn again, you will see greater abominations than these."

Ezekiel 8:16 So He brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house; and there, at the door of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men with their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and they were worshipping the sun toward the east.

In the service of the Temple the priests were divided into twenty-four groups called “courses.” Each group served in sequence.

The number here, twenty-five, would represent all the priests plus the one high priest.

All the priests had literally turned their backs upon God and were instead worshipping the sun.

Ezekiel 8:17 And He said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it a trivial thing to the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they commit here? For they have filled the land with violence; then they have returned to provoke Me to anger. Indeed they put the branch to their nose.

Ezekiel had seen a lot of abominations. It was not “trivial” in the sense that it greatly affected the daily lives of the people of God. Instead of peace they experienced “violence.” Violence is a sign that a people are no longer worshipping God. It indicates they have no regard for the fact man was made in the image of God.

It concerns me that our nation is filled with so much violence - both real and gratuitous. It is undeniable evidence that we do not treat others as having been made in the image of God.

Violence was one of the reasons God judged the world by the great flood. It is no small matter.

The Lord said, "they have returned to provoke Me to anger." The people took it for granted God would defend the Temple no matter their spiritual condition. It was provoking Him to act.

In fact, they were putting "the branch to their nose." Commentators have no idea exactly what this meant except to say that whatever it was it was the equivalent of thumbing their noses at God.

Ezekiel 8:18 Therefore I also will act in fury. My eye will not spare nor will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them."

I keep putting this kind of declaration in the image of a child who deserves corporal punishment. If they have earned their spanking, no amount of crying can change the inevitable. You hear them but you "will not hear them" in the sense of changing your mind. A line has been crossed and there is only one possible outcome.

Ah, but afterwards the discipline yields its pleasant fruits.

Ezekiel was hair-lifted to Jerusalem. You and I will be air-lifted to the New Jerusalem. The resurrection and rapture of the church is imminent.

Meantime survey your life for anything that is causing or could cause spiritual damage. Get rid of it. Get ready.

