

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

“Only You Can Endure Forest Fires”

20:45-21:17

Paul Anka heard a French version of a popular song. There was something about it that reminded him of Frank Sinatra. He acquired the rights to it, then rewrote some of the lyrics to better reflect the career and life of the singer. The result was the defiant song, “My Way.”

It ends like this:

*For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels
The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!*

Pretty sad from the point of view that life is eternal and that every knee will one day bow to Jesus Christ.

If your life was a song, right now, what song would it be?

I only ask because our text tonight will end in a song, and it’s a pretty sad one. But that’s what you’d expect from a prophet who was giving a message of God’s sure and complete judgment upon His people.

In the Hebrew text, verse forty-five of chapter twenty is the first verse of chapter twenty-one. When the books of the Bible were originally written, they did not contain chapter or verse references. The Bible was divided into chapters and verses to help us find Scriptures more quickly and easily.

It is much easier to find Psalm 22 than it is to find "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

The chapter divisions commonly used today were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions into place in around 1227AD. The Wycliffe English Bible of 1382 was the first Bible to use this chapter pattern. Since the Wycliffe Bible, nearly all Bible translations have followed Langton's chapter divisions.

The Hebrew Old Testament was divided into verses by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Nathan in 1448. Robert Estienne, who was also known as Stephanus, was the first to divide the New Testament into standard numbered verses, in 1555. Stephanus essentially used Nathan's verse divisions for the Old Testament. Since that time, beginning with the Geneva Bible, the chapter and verse divisions employed by Stephanus have been accepted into nearly all the Bible versions.

The first forty-four verses of chapter twenty looked far into the future at the ultimate regathering and restoration of Israel. Beginning with verse forty-five we're back in the sixth century BC talking about the impending invasion of Judah and Jerusalem by Babylon.

Ezekiel 20:45 Furthermore the word of the Lord came to me, saying,
Ezekiel 20:46 "Son of man, set your face toward the south; preach against the south and prophesy against the forest land, the South,
Ezekiel 20:47 and say to the forest of the South, 'Hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree and every dry tree in you; the blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be scorched by it.
Ezekiel 20:48 All flesh shall see that I, the Lord, have kindled it; it shall not be quenched." ' ' "

Ezekiel referred to Judah as "south" or "the south" because the invading armies of Babylon would come upon them from the north.

The analogy of the "forest" seems to be that the trees represent the people of Judah, not the actual forest. "Every green tree" would be the righteous,

those who were believers; “every dry tree” would be the unrighteous, those who were nonbelievers.

Was God going to destroy the righteous with the wicked? You might recall from an earlier passage that God had gone through the land marking the righteous. They would be spared, but not entirely. They would not be killed, but they would have to endure the calamity coming upon the nation.

The “fire” was coming upon the forest, upon both the green trees and the dry trees. For the dry trees, it would mean utter destruction. For the green trees it would be a refining.

Even in a natural forest, some trees have a greater chance of survival than others. Think of this fire as God’s controlled burn upon the nation.

As individual believers we claim the promise of First Peter 4:12,

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;

When Peter compared the persecution of Christians to fire, he had a particular type of fire in mind. In the first chapter of his letter he compared your faith to "gold" that is "tested by fire." He was talking about the controlled fire that a refiner of gold uses to purify and purge the raw ore into something beautiful and useful. The ore must be cast into a mold and heated to 1900 degrees Fahrenheit. As it is heated the impurities within the raw ore rise to the surface and are skimmed-off. The refiner knows all the impurities are gone when the heated gold is mirror-like and he can see in it his reflection.

Jesus is your Refiner! He has control over their heat and their duration. He's looking to see His reflection in your life.

The forest fire seems pretty straight forward. Ezekiel, however, has an observation for the Lord in verse forty-nine.

Ezekiel 20:49 Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! They say of me, 'Does he not speak parables?' "

The disciples of Jesus asked the Lord something like this. His answer was this:

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: 'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for Me to heal them.'"

A better question than "Why are you speaking in parables?" would be "What does the parable mean?"

Parables, as a method of teaching, thus had an initial effect of revealing the spiritual temperature of the hearers. If they complained about them, acting like they couldn't understand them, it was a pretty good indication their hearts were cold.

The Lord responded to Ezekiel with another parable.

Ezekiel 21:1 And the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

Ezekiel 21:2 "Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem, preach against the holy places, and prophesy against the land of Israel;

Ezekiel 21:3 and say to the land of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord: "Behold, I am against you, and I will draw My sword out of its sheath and cut off both righteous and wicked from you.

Ezekiel 21:4 Because I will cut off both righteous and wicked from you, therefore My sword shall go out of its sheath against all flesh from south to north,

Ezekiel 21:5 that all flesh may know that I, the Lord, have drawn My sword out of its sheath; it shall not return anymore." '

The Babylonians were coming. But from Heaven's perspective, they were the sword in the hand of the Lord. He was using them as a weapon to judge His people.

Again we see that the righteous would have to endure this situation along with the unrighteous.

The invasion would come from the north. Here it is further described as from “south to north.” In other words, once the armies reached the south, they would return north. It’s a statement of complete invasion.

As we’ve seen repeatedly in these prophecies of Ezekiel, nothing could now stop the Lord’s plans to use Babylon against Israel.

Let me mention something that is just slightly out of context. A lot of times something happens in our world, some catastrophe, and certain Christian immediately explain it as the direct judgment of God.

Don’t jump on that bandwagon. Even if something is the direct judgment of God, our response ought to be one of compassion. Follow the lead of groups like Samaritan’s Purse.

Ezekiel was next called upon to give a visual aid to this parable.

Ezekiel 21:6 Sigh therefore, son of man, with a breaking heart, and sigh with bitterness before their eyes.

Again the great actor dramatized the situation. He represented a “breaking heart” by sighing “with bitterness.”

Drama definitely can be used for ministry!

Drawn-in by the drama, when the audience asked about it, Ezekiel would give them a short dialog:

Ezekiel 21:7 And it shall be when they say to you, 'Why are you sighing?' that you shall answer, 'Because of the news; when it comes, every heart will melt, all hands will be feeble, every spirit will faint, and all knees will be weak as water. Behold, it is coming and shall be brought to pass,' says the Lord God."

Ezekiel was representing to them their own future broken hearts and sighing.

His 'performance' concluded with a song. Commentators point out that verses eight through seventeen are in the poetic form of a lament to be sung, or at least the parts that are not explanations by the Lord. In other words, these verses contain the song Ezekiel was to sing along with the Lord speaking to him about them.

Ezekiel 21:8 Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

Ezekiel 21:9 "Son of man, prophesy and say, 'Thus says the Lord!' Say: 'A sword, a sword is sharpened And also polished!

Ezekiel 21:10 Sharpened to make a dreadful slaughter, Polished to flash like lightning! Should we then make mirth? It despises the scepter of My son, As it does all wood.

Ezekiel 21:11 And He has given it to be polished, That it may be handled; This sword is sharpened, and it is polished To be given into the hand of the slayer.'

It's the *Song of the Sword*, a dirge that captures the destruction from the point of view of the sword in the hand of the Lord.

Ezekiel 21:12 "Cry and wail, son of man; For it will be against My people, Against all the princes of Israel. Terrors including the sword will be against My people; Therefore strike your thigh.

Ezekiel 21:13 "Because it is a testing, And what if the sword despises even the scepter? The scepter shall be no more," says the Lord God.

It was a very animated song, including crying and wailing and the striking of the thigh. I wonder if Ezekiel didn't also

The word for "scepter" is *rod*. It signifies the governing authorities, in this case the appointed governor, Zedekiah, whose back-room political dealings with Egypt against God's will and word were largely to blame for the final assault on the nation and its capital.

Ezekiel 21:14 "You therefore, son of man, prophesy, And strike your hands together. The third time let the sword do double damage. It is the sword that slays, The sword that slays the great men, That enters their private chambers.

The "third time" refers to the third and final invasion that was impending.

Ezekiel 21:15 I have set the point of the sword against all their gates, That the heart may melt and many may stumble. Ah! It is made bright; It is grasped for slaughter:

Ezekiel 21:16 "Swords at the ready! Thrust right! Set your blade! Thrust left - Wherever your edge is ordered!

Ezekiel 21:17 "I also will beat My fists together, And I will cause My fury to rest; I, the Lord, have spoken."

Ezekiel is to strike his hands together to demonstrate that God is beating His fists together.

It's a stage gesture, striking or clapping the hands, to indicate the next movement or to call someone onto the stage.

God was choreographing the coming invasion. He was producing it. He was directing it.

We may not be called to a drama ministry like that of Ezekiel. But our lives are described as letters to be read by others in the world. So much is non-verbal, in the way we carry ourselves and in our body language.

Not to worry. Let the Lord fill you and He will 'animate' your features, your gestures, your movements, to better reflect His glory.

One final thought. Zephaniah 3:17 reads like this:

Zephaniah 3:17 The Lord your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, **He will rejoice over you with singing."**

We're familiar with singing to and about God; we did it tonight, we do it all the time.

How often do you think about God singing over you? And with rejoicing?

Your life has a soundtrack, performed by the Lord. Your life is a musical, orchestrated by the Lord.