

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

“Mountain Do’s & Don’ts”

6:1-14

A family trip to the mountains is a common and wholesome occurrence here in the shadow of the beautiful Sierra range.

It was common in sixth century Israel, too, but not wholesome. It was in the mountains, in the wilderness, that the Jews went to worship the gods of the Canaanites.

Gods like Molech. I’ve been taught he was represented by a small figure of bronze or brass with outstretched arms. The idol was hollow to accommodate coals that would make the entire figure burning hot.

It was upon those burning hot arms that the Canaanites and later the Jewish idolators sacrificed their live children.

Or perhaps it was a fertility god or goddess that you went into the wilderness to worship. If so you engaged in all manner of illicit, immoral sexual activity.

King Hezekiah in the eighth century removed these idols in the wilderness. They returned after his death.

King Josiah removed them in the seventh century. By the time of Ezekiel, in the sixth century, they were back and frequented by the Jews.

Through Ezekiel God will speak out against the mountains. He’s talking about the idols and the idolatry that was being practiced in those wilderness areas.

After the dramatic enactment of the siege and ruin of Jerusalem in chapters four and five, Ezekiel delivered two powerful sermons. We know them as chapters six and seven.

- Chapter six focuses on the idolatry as the cause for God's action against His chosen people.
- Chapter seven depicts the nature of the judgment.

Both of these sermons start this way.

Ezekiel 6:1 Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying:

By the way... It might be wrong to think Ezekiel only delivered this message one time. Today it is not uncommon for a minister to deliver a message more than once.

I remember being really blessed one time to realize that what we have recorded about the ministry of Jesus was representative of His message and methods. He did and said a lot more than is recorded. According to the apostle John, if everything Jesus did and said were recorded, the world would not be able to contain the books. (Not sure how many hard drives you'd need!).

God was the source of these words. It is beyond comforting to know without doubt that the words we read in the Bible are the words God intended for us to hear and understand. The Bible is, in fact, God-breathed and authoritative.

Any talk or study or sermon must be true to the text and its context. It must honor God's Word as His Word or it is useless information.

Ezekiel 6:2 "Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them,

Ezekiel 6:3 and say, 'O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord God! Thus says the Lord God to the mountains, to the hills, to the ravines, and to the valleys: "Indeed I, even I, will bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places.

It was in the wilderness - the "mountains... the hills... the ravines... and... the valleys" - that the people were practicing their idolatry. In the city of Jerusalem, in the Temple, they practiced (at least outwardly) Judaism and

the worship of the one true God. Away from town they cut loose and did as the Canaanites whose land they had conquered.

There are times that men seek to mix idolatry with the worship of God. They introduce practices borrowed from the world or from other religions saying it somehow enhances our experience of God.

It strikes me as sad that men in the emergent church movement are introducing such practices and that believers are excited by them. Maybe you've had someone rave about the practice of contemplative prayer.

What is it? One source defines it like this:

Contemplative prayer, also known as "centering prayer," is a meditative practice where the practitioner focuses on a word and repeats that word over and over for the duration of the exercise. While contemplative prayer is done differently in the various groups that practice it, there are similarities. Contemplative prayer involves choosing a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Contemplative prayer usually includes sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settling briefly and silently, introducing the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within. When a contemplative pray-er becomes aware of thoughts, he/she is to return ever so gently to the sacred word.

I'm sure there are variations. Nevertheless it is essentially an exercise in Eastern mysticism. You find this same thing in New Age cults. The Bible presents prayer as a direct communication with God - not some mystical exercise.

Along with many theological arguments against such a practice, consider this. If you wanted to really communicate at a deep level with your spouse, would you go out to a nice spot and then focus on one word, repeating it over and over again?

The problem with so many of these practices is that they make you feel as though you are drawing near to God on some mystical level when, in fact, you are building barriers to intimacy with Him.

Israel wasn't mixing false religion so much as they were doing it on the side. They were more like the Christian who worships God on Sunday then lives like the devil during the week.

One of the great things about being a Christian is that it makes you a whole person. You were born dead in trespasses and sins. You were physically alive and soulishly active but spiritually dead. When you are born-again, born for the second time spiritually, your spirit comes alive. It now communes with the Holy Spirit Who indwells you.

As a spiritual person you can put your entire life in its proper order. Your spirit can direct your soul and you can use your body to serve the Lord.

All of this happens, however, in the world - the fallen world. There are still mountains and hills and ravines and valleys that beckon to me.

- Some of them are wilderness places I once frequented before I was saved. Habits of the flesh, even addictions, still call to me. It's a spiritual version of *The Call of the Wild*. It starts out romantic and mysterious and forbidden but quickly becomes reprobate.
- Some of these wilderness places will be new to me. As the world around me continues to deteriorate morally I am confronted more-and-more by its values and philosophies. They wear on me, they wear me down, they desensitize me. If I'm not careful I become more like my surroundings - more a mountain-man than I really want to be.

We used to sing a song whose lyrics were, *Heartache, broken people, ruined lives are why He died on Calvary*. Jesus makes us whole and real. When we wander off into some wilderness of this world we risk becoming broken again. Not broken in the sense of having proper humility but in the sense of falling apart because we think we can live in parts or compartments after God has made us whole.

Cherish your wholeness. Be the same at home, at work, in church. Don't try to live even a small portion of your life in secret.

Ezekiel 6:4 Then your altars shall be desolate, your incense altars shall be broken, and I will cast down your slain men before your idols.

Ezekiel 6:5 And I will lay the corpses of the children of Israel before their idols, and I will scatter your bones all around your altars.

Ezekiel 6:6 In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be desolate, so that your altars may be laid waste and made desolate, your idols may be broken and made to cease, your incense altars may be cut down, and your works may be abolished.

Ezekiel 6:7 The slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

God intimated that there was a connection between their “altars” in the wilderness and their “dwelling places [in] the cities.” Whoever the Israelites were while practicing idolatry, that is who they really were at home.

God would bring their idolatry down upon them. He would give them what they had chosen for themselves. The end of idolatry is destruction and death.

If you want to steer clear of the wilderness then project ahead to the end result. The guy or gal who gives in to flirting at work doesn't ever see themselves committing adultery. Truth is, though, every step away from integrity, back into the wilderness, brings you closer to the end.

Even if you avoid going all the way in to sin, you are walking away from the Lord. You are going in a wrong direction.

Even if you're just *looking back!*

God declares, “You shall know that I am the Lord.” Well, of course they knew it. But not in a way that made enough of a difference. Having done all He could to reach and warn His people for many centuries, all that was left was for Him to send punitive discipline.

It would work! A remnant would be preserved to return to the Lord.

Ezekiel 6:8 "Yet I will leave a remnant, so that you may have some who escape the sword among the nations, when you are scattered through the countries.

Ezekiel 6:9 Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations where they are carried captive, because I was crushed by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot after their idols; they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations.

Ezekiel 6:10 And they shall know that I am the Lord; I have not said in vain that I would bring this calamity upon them."

God is the one who introduces the picture of our relationship to Him as a romance, as a marriage. God considered Israel as a man considered his wife. Their wilderness escapades were not mere exercises in comparative religion. *They were adulterous affairs!*

Note the phrase, “I was crushed by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot...” In the Hebrew this reads, “You can’t hide your lyin’ eyes.” (Not really!).

- What for a pastor might be an interesting experiment by introducing some ancient but idolatrous practice is really adultery.
- What for me or you might be a momentary excursion back into the wilderness and off of the narrow path is harlotry.

I don’t want to get to the Reward Seat of Jesus and hear any words like this, and I know that is true of you, too.

I think the romantic element of God’s love for us should not be minimized. We should think of it more often. I’ve seen the eyes and the countenance of couples where one has to admit to infidelity. I’ve seen hearts crushed and lives ruined. So have you!

It’s something I can project on to my walk with the Lord.

Look at it this way. If I think of the Lord as a Judge, that’s true and accurate. But let’s face it. We all break certain laws because the consequences aren’t that severe. We speed in our vehicles. If we even get to the judge, it’s really not that big a deal. We pay our fine and go on our way.

But if I think of my Lord as I do my spouse, with an intimate, romantic connection, then any infraction is enough to crush His heart.

The Lord goes on to say, “they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations.” Self-loathing can be a good thing. When you are committing abominable things, it’s a good thing.

God had to discipline them in order for them to see the real consequences of their idolatry. I’m certain he didn’t like doing so but it was the only thing left for Him. He did not do it “in vain” but for a great purpose.

Ezekiel 6:11 'Thus says the Lord God: "Pound your fists and stamp your feet, and say, 'Alas, for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.

Commentators are all over the place on why Ezekiel was told to “pound [his] fists and stamp [his] feet.” Seems to me it was a dramatic emphasis to get people’s attention.

The specifics of God’s punishment are laid out. If you are a nation, and God is disciplining you as a nation, then He’s likely to use another nation against you. The “sword” was Babylon. “Famine and pestilence” follow close on the heels of the sword.

Ezekiel 6:12 He who is far off shall die by the pestilence, he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who remains and is besieged shall die by the famine. Thus will I spend My fury upon them.

Here God spelled-out what Ezekiel had acted-out for 430 days outside his house.

Ezekiel 6:13 Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain are among their idols all around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every thick oak, wherever they offered sweet incense to all their idols.

If you could capture this as a photo it would speak volumes. The Israelites would be scattered dead around the altars in the wilderness where they had chosen death instead of life.

Ezekiel 6:14 So I will stretch out My hand against them and make the land desolate, yes, more desolate than the wilderness toward Diblah, in all their dwelling places. Then they shall know that I am the Lord.' " " "

Essentially this says that all through the land of Israel, from the north to the south, there would be desolation. Their “dwelling places” would become just as desolate as the wilderness.

Again the imagery is powerful. The Jews thought they could live one way toward God in their cities but worship Him another way in the wilderness. God saw them as having one heart and it was against Him, full of adultery. So He would make every place the wilderness to them.

For the third time in this chapter Ezekiel stated that as a result of the judgment Israel would come to know that He is the Lord.

Have you ever had a serious talk, maybe with one of your kids, and said, “I’m your dad,” or “I’m your mom.”

Was it because they forgot? No, but they were acting like they forgot. You were reminding them of your unique and special love for them.

As God’s kids, we don’t forget He is our Father, but we can act as though we did.

If you hear anything tonight may it be God the Father saying, “I’m your dad,” and Jesus saying, “I’m your Bridegroom.”

