

EZEKIEL

Cry Me a River

*By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down,
yea, we wept When we remembered Zion
Psalm 137:1*

Text

Ezekiel 20:45-49

Topic

The LORD describes His discipline of Judah and Jerusalem as a fire that will consume everything in its path.

Title

"I've Seen Fire & I've See Pain"

"Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra."

You are officially a Trekkie if you recognize that phrase. It comes from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in an episode where the Enterprise encounters the Tamarians. They are a species that speaks entirely in metaphors drawn from their mythology. Captain Picard is taken and stranded with Captain Dathon, who offers him a dagger and says, "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra." Picard initially mistakes it for a threat. The next morning, when a predator appears, he comprehends Dathon is inviting him to fight together against the common danger, just like "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra."

All I have to say about that is, "The LORD & Ezekiel kindle the fire."

Ezekiel was God's 6th century prophet to the Judean Jews exiled in Babylon. A remarkable number of his prophecies were presented as silent theatrical dramas. When he did speak, Ezekiel frequently did so utilizing riddles, allegories, and metaphors. So much so that Ezekiel could say (in verse 49), "Ah, Lord GOD! They say of me, 'Does he not speak parables?'"

Ezekiel describes the third and final siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians as if it were a catastrophic forest fire.

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 Don't Be Dry In The Fire**, and **#2 Don't Despair In The Fire**.

#1- Don't Be Dry In The Fire

What is the deadliest job?

It's not crab fishing. It is sitting behind the Resolute desk in the Oval Office of the White House as President.

- Forty-five men have been president. Twenty of them, 44%, were the subject of assassination attempts.
- Four out of forty-five presidents were assassinated - Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy.

Still, a deadlier job was OT Prophet.

Stephen, on the verge of martyrdom, asked, "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who foretold the Just One" (Acts 7:52).

We can be sure that was not lost on Ezekiel. Jewish tradition holds that Ezekiel was murdered by fellow Israelites in Babylon.

Ezk 20:45 Furthermore the word of the LORD came to me...

God's Word came to him in some of the weirdest ways in all the Bible.

In the opening chapters of Ezekiel he shared the Word of God in silence, acting-out the LORD's messages to the Jews. Here is a list of the enacted prophecies:

- The Siege of a Brick (4:1-33). Ezekiel inscribes a brick with the name Jerusalem and stages a mock siege against it, symbolizing the impending Babylonian siege of the city.
- Lying on His Sides (4:4-8). He lies on his left side for 390 days to represent the years of Israel's sin and then on his right side for 40 days to represent Judah's sin.
- Eating Defiled Bread (4:9-17). Ezekiel prepares bread using inferior ingredients, then cooks it over cow dung, symbolizing the scarcity and defilement the people will experience during the siege.
- Shaving His Head and Beard (5:1-4). He shaves his head and beard, dividing the hair into three parts: burning one-third, striking one-third with a sword, and

scattering one-third to the wind. This act represents the various fates awaiting the inhabitants of Jerusalem - death by plague, sword, and exile.

- Packing An Exile's Baggage (12:1-7). Ezekiel packs his belongings as if going into exile and digs through a wall to carry them out, symbolizing the forthcoming exile of Judah's inhabitants.
- Trembling While Eating (12:17-20). He eats his food with trembling and drinks water with fear, illustrating the anxiety and dread during their captivity.

His prophecies are also replete with metaphors and allegories. The word translated can also mean *riddles*. Here are some of those:

- The Vine That Was Burned (ch15). Israel is compared to a useless vine that is burned, symbolizing God's dashed hopes for Jerusalem.
- The Unfaithful Wife (16). A parable of a woman (Jerusalem) whom God cared for, but she became unfaithful, representing Israel's spiritual adultery.
- The Two Eagles and the Vine (ch17) A riddle about two eagles (Babylon and Egypt) and a vine (Judah), illustrating Judah's rebellion against Babylon.
- The Boiling Pot (24:3-14). A parable of a cooking pot filled with meat, symbolizing the siege of Jerusalem and its coming destruction.
- The Parable of the Lion's Cubs (19:1-9). A lament comparing Israel's kings to lion cubs who were captured and taken away, symbolizing the downfall of the monarchy.
- The Parable of the Withered Vine (19:10-14). Israel is compared to a strong vine that is uprooted and burned, symbolizing the nation's judgment.

This story is often called the Parable of the Two Trees, but the focus is on the fire, making the Parable of the Forest Fire a better title.

Ezk 20:46 "Son of man, set your face toward the south; preach against the south and prophesy against the forest land, the South,

I wonder if he didn't receive this as a vision? It's visually stunning.

Ezekiel is called "Son of man" 90x to highlight that he served the LORD as the human representative between He and His people.

He rises and turns south to prophesy against the south and the forest land of the South. In the Hebrew Scriptures, these are three distinct words. It is similar to how we refer to the southern United States as the South, the Deep South, and Dixie.

Ezk 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.

Why not just say it plainly? Think of a story, whether in print or on screen, that builds up to a dramatic reveal. Star Wars is a perfect example. Hearing Darth Vader declare, "No, I am your father," at the perfect moment, carries far more impact than simply stating it beforehand.

Ezekiel warned of Jerusalem's fall, with the forest as Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple, and the trees as its people - some righteous (evergreen), others not righteous (dry).

This is a timely metaphor in that we all have seen some images of the recent devastating fires in Southern California. My childhood was spent living in the foothills of San Bernardino. It was not unusual to have a fire engine stationed in our driveway. I can recall at least two times we were ordered to evacuate.

The third and final siege against Jerusalem by mercenary forces of King Nebuchadnezzar would play-out like a fast moving fire that could not be quenched. I believe it's called a *conflagration*.

"Parables do not stand on all fours." We shouldn't force every detail to carry meaning unless the parable itself requires it. The clear yet terrifying message here is that Judah, Jerusalem, the Temple, and the remaining Jews in the city would experience violence.

This parable is not meant to give us any insight into eternal life or eternity. It is not an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is entirely earthly. It is strictly about the historic events of 586BC.

The righteous suffered along with the unrighteous.

Didn't Abraham plead with God about Sodom & Gomorrah, saying, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (Genesis 18:23). God granted Abraham his ask, sparing Abraham's nephew, Lot, *but it wasn't a universal promise*. He didn't say that the righteous would *never* suffer alongside the unrighteous. Historical records suggest most Christians fled Jerusalem before its destruction in 70AD, heeding a divine warning noted by Eusebius and Epiphanius.

However, the righteous are not **always** exempt from suffering in a fallen world.

Saints suffer.

We pointed-out that prophets were customarily killed. OT believers had “trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented - of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in* dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise” (Hebrews 11:36-39).

We sometimes fare no better. The apostle Paul has a long section on suffering in Romans 8 with the theme, “FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE **KILLED** ALL DAY LONG.”

At many points along the timeline of humanity, being a Christian is the deadliest job.

Historical Christian Persecution Statistics:¹

- More than 70 million Christians have been martyred in the course of history. More than half were martyred in the 20th century under communist and fascist government (Gordon-Conwell Resources).
- In the 21st century, roughly 100,000 to 160,000 Christians were killed each year (Gordon-Conwell Resources and World Christian Database, respectively).
- Roughly 1,093,000 Christians were martyred, worldwide, between 2000 and 2010 (World Christian Database).

Modern Global Church Persecution Statistics:²

- 322 Christians are killed for their faith every month (Open Doors).
- 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed every month (Open Doors).
- 772 forms of violence (beatings, kidnappings, rape, arrest, etc.) are committed against Christians every month (Open Doors).

¹ Gordon-Conwell Resources, World Christian Database

² Open Doors

How should a believer respond? Habakkuk, a 7th-century prophet to Judah, learned of the coming violence. In his short book, he describes his reaction, saying "I heard, and I trembled within; my lips quivered at the sound. My legs gave way beneath me, and I shook in terror (3:16).

In the very next verse Habakkuk describes the response of the righteous in the time of the Babylonian exile: "Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls - Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's *feet*, And He will make me walk on my high hills" (3:17-19).

In verse 16 his legs were "trembling," and he could not walk. *Next minute he is leaping in the mountains like a deer!*

This is not the result of positive thinking. It didn't come to Habakkuk through meditation. He wasn't making a positive confession. *What happened to him was supernatural.*

With the full revelation of Scripture, we see that Habakkuk encountered the Holy Spirit, as his rejoicing reflects the Spirit's work. True joy is a fruit the Spirit produces in believers.

- If you are not saved, the Holy Spirit is with you, testifying about your need for Jesus.
- If you are in Christ, embrace the reality that you *can* do all things through Jesus.

God the Holy Spirit is our indispensable, inexhaustible supply of living water. Drink of that water and you will never thirst again.

#2 - Don't Despair In The Fire

In the I-don't-recommend-you-ever-watch-it category is the screen production of *Jesus Christ: Superstar*. Judas is the protagonist. At one point he says to Jesus, "Why'd you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you'd come today you would have reached a whole nation... Israel 4BC had no mass communication." It makes you wonder... But not for long is you understand that God is always trying to confound mankind. His wisdom always seems foolish to the unsaved, unregenerated in heart. John Stott represents many who explain that the timing was ideal both politically and culturally. Rome had unified much of the world,

Greek was a common language, and roads facilitated travel, aiding the spread of the Gospel.

I can almost see that. But if it's all about roads & language, it would have been better to come later. We must emphasize the wisdom of God which seems foolish to mankind.

Jesus came at the perfect moment, the prophesied moment, the propitiation-ary moment in human history.

The LORD declared (v48), "All flesh shall see that I, the LORD, have kindled it; it shall not be quenched."

Ezekiel didn't see it that way. He said (v49), "Ah, Lord GOD! They say of me, 'Does he not speak parables?' "

Ezekiel's words carry a sense of despair, as no one truly listened. If they did, they dismissed him as merely a storyteller, an entertainer playing the roles of actor, comedian, chef, riddler, and singer of laments.

If we're not careful, we can begin to act as if our commentary on the words of the Bible somehow enhances it. In reality, sometimes our commentary can get in the way. God's word can stand on its own.

I believe it was Jerry Bridges who felt led to teach Revelation by reading it over three Sundays, and he saw great fruit from it. We need more confidence in the Word as alive and powerful.

I can understand Ezekiel's frustration. He must have felt that God's Word deserved to reach beyond the small, unbelieving audience of unrighteous Jews by the River Chebar in Babylon.

I wonder what he thinks now?