

Lesson 16 "Condemnations"

Ezekiel 11:1-15:8

Last week we celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday.

Perhaps, in one media or another, you heard repeated the stirring words of his famous speech titled "I Have a Dream."

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

"When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Vision – hope – we cling to that whether it's in the area of equality or unity or the hope that today's struggles will change into blessings tomorrow. Certainly we as Christians have the vision of our Blessed Hope, the Lord Jesus Christ, and being with Him throughout eternity.

How difficult for Ezekiel to be the one to dash the hopes of those already in exile. We remember that Ezekiel was among those taken in

the first deportation, so Jerusalem, the temple, and home was still fresh in the minds of the captives.

False prophets in exile were saying, this is temporary . . . we'll soon be going back. False prophets in Jerusalem were saying, we're safe . . . we'll never go.

The vision that began in chapter 8 when the Spirit took Ezekiel to Jerusalem continues. He'd seen the idolatry that was practiced in the temple; he'd seen idolaters slain at the Lord's command; he'd seen the glory of the Lord depart from the temple. Now, in today's lesson, 25 leaders were assembled "plotting evil and giving wicked advice to the city." Two of them are named -- Jazzaniah and Pel-a-tiah.

In essence, these men were telling everyone, "You know, when meat is inside the cooking pot it's protected from the fire. We'll be okay. Jerusalem is as strong as a heavy cooking pot and we're inside protected." In other words, "We may be in the frying pan, but we're not in the fire."

God, however, had His own idea that we can probably relate to in modern terms . . . "You're out of the frying pan and into the fire." The contents (the meat – the people) of the pot would indeed be spilled out into the fire of judgment. To continue the cooking metaphor: "Their goose was cooked." God's condemnation on these false city leaders was punctuated with a strong visual aid – Pel-a-tiah died!

Fearful Ezekiel fell on his face . . . “God, will You completely destroy the remnant?” God may have had words of condemnation to a sinful nation, but He had words of comfort for Ezekiel. He would be their sanctuary in exile; He would gather them and return them to the land; and, most importantly, He would give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them. He said, “I will remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. They will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”

This prophecy goes beyond the return from captivity, and speaks prophetically of the ultimate, full restoration of Israel in the future Millennium when the people will have a new heart (Jer. 31:33). The message of the Lord comes through loud and clear. The principle is unchanging and unchangeable: sin brings judgment. Rebellion turns people from God and God from people.

A new heart is needed and God is in the heart-transplant business. Perhaps some of you remember the name Doctor Christiaan Barnard. He performed the first human heart transplant on December 3, 1967. It was an amazing fete of medical history. The recipient, Mr. Louis Washkansky only lived for 18 days before dying of pneumonia, but his new heart beat strongly to the end. Physicians may exchange a damaged or diseased heart for a new one, but only the Great Physician can change a cold, unregenerate heart and infuse into it the life of His Spirit, the reality of His love, and the warmth of His presence.

Because the Shekinah glory of God resided in the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem, there was a very real feeling that God dwelt in Jerusalem. It was comforting to know He'd be with the exiles, but Ezekiel was witnessing something extraordinary. In last week's lesson, Ezekiel had seen in his vision the glory of the Lord depart from the temple. This was the beginning of the long threatened removal of the visible evidence of God's presence among His people.

Now the glory of God went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it. The eastern gate was the departure gate for the Mount of Olives. God was about to withdraw His presence and blessing from Jerusalem and the nation. Because sin and idolatry was rampant in the city, God withdrew – God and sin cannot coexist. Yet the glory lingered – almost brooded (like a mother hen wanting to gather her chicks under her wings) – on the Mount of Olives as though waiting for the people to repent.

With the coming of Jesus, the presence of God reappeared, not to a physical, man-made temple, but as John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Some versions say, “He tabernacled among His people.” In the person of Jesus, God's presence could again be beheld. Last year in our study of Acts we read of Jesus' ascension from the Mount of Olives and

when we study Zechariah 14, we'll see this glory descend to the Mount of Olives as the Lord Jesus returns in His Second Coming.

The vision was over. Returned by the Spirit, Ezekiel reported all he had seen. Can you imagine the reaction of the exiles? God has left His people . . . home is destroyed . . . what will happen to us . . . woe is me! We'd like to think their hearts melted in repentance, but just like a hard-boiled egg when it's dropped, there may be some fine cracks in the outer shell, but inside it's still hard-boiled. And so was Ezekiel's audience.

In chapters 12-19 we have a series of signs, messages and parables of judgment. 12:1-16 is the Sign of the Luggage; 12:17-20 the Sign of the Trembling Eater; and in 12:21-28 a Message of Impending Judgment.

We're all struck by visual aids. Who can forget the bowl of coins that Dennis surprised us with a few weeks ago? In churches preachers are mostly talking to the converted. Few of us have had experience with the difficult task of street preaching . . . getting the attention of those who don't want to listen. Ever stop to think that Jesus was a "visual aid" from the Father?

Chapter 12 opens with God's statement, "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear, but they do not hear." If you've spent very much time in your Bible, you'll know that this is not the only time we hear this

phrase – Moses used it in Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 6:9-10; Jeremiah 5:21. Jesus used it and it's in the Book of Acts 28:26-27.

When people say they can't believe, it's not a mental problem, it's a matter of the will of the heart – they don't want to believe. The phenomenon is partly due to the “blinding” work of Satan who distracts us with other pieces of interesting information that nullifies the full impact of what we see or hear. It's true, isn't it? We're constantly receiving information and become easily distracted. And we have a great deal of challenge putting the things we know into action.

So, part one – eyes to see. Ezekiel begins to act it out. He packs his bags, digs through wall, blindfolds himself – prophetic of Zedekiah's coming fate – and trudges off into the sunset. Part two – ears to hear. What does this mean? It's interpreted – more captives to come including blind Zedekiah. “Then they will know that I am the Lord.”

Did you ever stop to think that God uses every one of us as an example? Those who respond to Him demonstrate His saving power, while those who reject Him show forth His eternal justice. What do you think God is doing today so people will know “I am the Lord?”

Again eyes to see – He pours out his cereal and begins to shiver and shake. The people seeing him ask, “What's the matter with you? You have a chill?” Then for ears to hear – “I want you to know what's happening over there in Jerusalem. There's a famine over there. There's fear over there. God is going to destroy the city.”

Ezekiel in exile and Jeremiah in Jerusalem were both getting about as much serious attention to their messages from God as a man would today wearing a sandwich sign that says, “The end of the word is here!” Apathy then like the apathy predicted in 2 Peter 3:4. “They will say, Where is this coming He promised? Ever since our father died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”

The long-suffering nature of God’s character is interpreted in one of two ways: 1) unbelief in God’s Word (He wouldn’t harm His people) or, 2) we believe God, but it won’t happen in our day. Not to worry. That’s the devil’s lie – there is no hurry, repent tomorrow. Procrastination is the assassination of motivation. So the second condemnation is for those who foster such procrastination. People say nothing ever happens? God says, “In your days, I will fulfill it!”

I hope that gives each one of us cause to think. “What prophecy will be fulfilled in my lifetime? Maybe today is the day He’s coming back.” It should certainly refocus our priorities, shouldn’t it?

Chapter 13 has a message against the false prophets and the false prophetesses. Perhaps nothing is more damaging to the people of God than a prophet who tells his hearers what they want to hear at the expense of what they need to hear. To get on my favorite soapbox again, that’s why we study the Scriptures – Old and New Testament – verse by verse. When we lecturers prepare, we try to bring both some application and some interpretation, but we stick to the text. It’s God’s

Word that is total truth. That's why you read it for yourself every week. We don't study a book about the Word of God; we study God's Word. Know the truth and the truth will set you free.

So what did the people want to hear? Everything's under control . . . trust your leaders . . . peace is just around the corner . . . Jerusalem's walls are strong. So that's the message that they got. But it was a whitewashed wall of lies to be exposed by the rains of judgment. Therefore a triple judgment on the false prophets was given: 1) they'd lose their influence and honored position; 2) they'd be omitted from the register of God's people which barred them from fellowship with God; and 3) they would not enter the land of Israel.

The idolatry that sucked the spiritual life out of Israel had many forms. Not just the statues on the corners and in the temple, but in the prevalence of occult practices in the land. The prophetesses were guilty of practicing witchcraft, sorcery or magic. They'd give flattering divinations – another form of telling the people what they wanted to hear. They'd supply magic charms to ward off evil. If you didn't know before, you learned it in this lesson. Leviticus 19:26 strictly forbids the practice of witchcraft or any dealings with the occult.

We'd probably be hard pressed to find someone in this room who hasn't read his horoscope at sometime in the past. Years ago, when I used to read mine, it would always say, "Work hard and save your money." Never was very much fun in my future.

To God, this whole area of fortune-tellers, horoscopes and astrology, psychics, spiritualists, etc. is an area we should have nothing to do with. It's an open door for satanic penetration and, if there's one thing we're prone to do, it's underestimate the power of our enemy. God says, "You're to have nothing to do with it." It was true then and it's true today. Vs. 22 "You disheartened the righteous with your lies when I had brought them no grief, and you discouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives. I will save my people from your hands. And then you will know that I am the Lord."

Maybe some of what Ezekiel said was getting through, because in chapter 14 some elders come to inquire of him. He looks them in the eye and says so to speak, God knows you have idols in your heart. Why should He let you ask Him anything at all? But He will because He wants to recapture the hearts of His people who have deserted Him for idols.

God always responds to the desire to know the right way, even from sinners and idolaters. What a God of grace! And He has a straightforward answer: Repent! Repentance turns its back on any other source of hope or self-justification and finds its refuge in the Lord alone. It's the expression used by the hymn writer Augustus Toplady, "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling." Renounce your detestable practices!

Then it's almost as if the elders asked hopefully, "Couldn't a righteous man intercede for us?" The idea being that God would never destroy the righteous with the wicked. People still cling to what they think are transferable merits of good people. You've heard it before, "God has no grandchildren." Each one must be adopted into the family of God. Repentance is an individual responsibility.

So intercession won't avert the four coming judgments of famine, wild beasts, sword and plague. Even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in Jerusalem when destruction came, they couldn't save it. I don't want you to get a wrong impression that intercessory prayer isn't effective. It most certainly is. But when we pray, it's for God's will to be done and this was a city of people with unrepentant hearts of stone.

Righteousness means when God looks at the heart He sees that He alone is God – the Almighty – the object of utmost desire. God had looked at the heart of these three men given as examples and declared them righteous. When God looks at our hearts, He knows if the Savior is there. The Romans 3:22-23 Scripture in our lesson today defines how we are seen by God as righteous – "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So it's not our own righteousness that will save us, but the righteousness of Jesus that engulfs us into Himself.

As the exiles would watch the remnant that was coming in the next two deportations, the wickedness of this group would be obvious. It was their conduct and their actions that deserved judgment. The exiles could take comfort that God was right to punish . . . God has done nothing without cause.

The lesson closes out with an allegory. Israel had long been compared to a vine in Scripture. Hosea 10:1 says, “Israel is an empty vine.” The theme was familiar – Israel was chosen and cared for by God to bring forth much fruit that would glorify Him, but it had become barren and wild, sour and bitter. Vines that don’t bear grapes simply clutter up the ground. You can’t build with them. It’s not even good as a peg to hang clothes on. If it’s thrown into the fire, it burns at the ends and chars in the middle, so it’s not even good firewood. Burned vines that are charred and smoldering are worse than useless.

What is the purpose of the vine? To bear fruit. Jesus used it as an example in John 15:1 “I am the true vine.” The emphasis is on His true effectiveness as the vine of God as opposed to the failure of Israel to be that vine. All that Israel has failed be, the Lord Jesus would be. And there was an added dimension to the ministry of the vine: His branches . . . His disciples. Men and women in Christ are given the opportunity to be, through Him, what Israel was called to be – the human means through which the Lord would make Himself known.

Is what we've read in this week's lesson relevant for us today?

Regardless of the circumstances, a new heart will set you free.

Regardless of skepticism, God's Word will be fulfilled.

Regardless of man's opinion, repentance is God's focus.

For the exiles, their sin led them to captivity. And for us, like an octopus, the tentacles of sin still tries to suck us captive. The only true freedom – the “Free at last” kind” – we'll ever know is repentance and forgiveness of that sin in the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise God Almighty – in Christ – we truly are free at last!