

Lecture 18

“Prophesies against the Land”

Ezekiel 19:1-23:49

It would be wonderful if life was always as full of love and flowers and candy and sweet sentiments as Valentine’s Day brings to mind. It’s certainly one of my favorite times of year. But today’s hype will turn to green for St. Patrick’s Day and chocolate bunnies for Easter probably before the weekend is out. For retail – they have a pretty good handle on what’s next to promote on the calendar.

When we started this year, and announced that our course of study would be Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, we told you that we would be studying a lot of prophecy. And that intrigues us, because we all want to know what will happen in the future. But we’ve been studying along and we seem to be getting more of a history lesson than prophetic insight. I daresay that I could probably recall more about the history of Israel right now, than I could about American history; and probably come closer to naming the succession of Israel’s rulers than the exact order of our Presidents.

Bible prophecy is about the Jewish nation – God’s chosen people. And even though we are not the focus of Bible prophecy, we, as Gentiles, as the church, have been grafted into Christ, the True Vine, and

through that connection, it becomes vitally important that we know what our God has planned for the future.

Jeremiah had been in Jerusalem foretelling of the failure of Egyptian alliances and the coming sword of God's judgment by the invasion of Babylon. Exile for 70 years was prophesied and, yet, the Lord Himself would restore them to the land. There would be a new covenant written on the heart.

Ezekiel was already in exile with the same prophetic message . . . judgment, exile, restoration to the land, a new covenant and a prophecy, yet to be fulfilled, of specific land distribution and a new temple in the millennial kingdom.

So, we read our Bibles and see the prophecy of **WHAT** would happen, and we read **HOW** it would happen, but Ezekiel especially makes sure we know **WHY** it was going to happen.

Israel's history was one of rebellion against a God who had not only chosen them to be His people – a fruitful vine, but He delivered them through the Exodus experiences, and kept His promises to give them the land. Through Judah, whose tribal symbol was the lion, would come the Messiah.

In chapter 19 of this week's lesson, Ezekiel speaks of both – the cubs of the lion Judah and the fruitful vine. Both were a huge disappointment to God. The cubs, which were kings Jehoahaz and Jehoachin, did not protect and defend God's people, but tore them up,

devouring men. They were not ruling from the throne of David with God's leadership. No, princes, priests, politicians and the people ignored God AND the prophets. Jehoahaz would go to Egypt and die there. Jehoachin would be exiled to Babylon.

The fruitful vine once had strong branches fit for a ruler's scepter in David's reign, but now, with Zedekiah, it was dry, withered, fruitless, and ready for the fires of judgment. And that was fact.

Eleven months earlier, as we studied in Ezekiel 8, he'd been sitting with the elders in front of his house and he had a vision about the temple in Jerusalem being fully defiled with idols. And the Glory of the Lord departed from the temple. Jerusalem's fate was sealed and Ezekiel faithfully told the elders all he saw. Now the elders were back in chapter 20.

"Inquire of the Lord for us, Ezekiel." Many years ago I was in Taiwan visiting a friend and we made the tourist rounds and saw temples, if not on every street corner, at least in every neighborhood. People were casting lots (rolling dice) in front of their idols as if repeating the action until they got the answer they wanted to hear. I picture these elders, not liking the message of doom, wanting Ezekiel to "ask God again. We're His people, surely He won't do this. We want an answer that we're going home soon."

But God said, "No more questions! You listen to Me!"

And then Israel's history is rehearsed again.

I delivered you from bondage in Egypt – you rebelled.
I gave you My laws and promised blessing – you rebelled.
I warned you of the consequences of disobedience – you rebelled.
I took pity in the wilderness years and brought you into the land –
you rebelled.

You broke my Sabbaths and chased after idols and your children
did the same.

The firstborn belonged to Me, but you sacrificed them to your
idols.

Enough, I say!!

But I am God – I am faithful to the covenant even if you are not. My name, my reputation, demands that disobedience be punished. But My mercy, My love, My grace will bring you back into the bond of the covenant. I, Myself, will restore you, I will accept you, I will regather you from where you have been scattered, and I will show Myself holy among you. When I bring you back to the land, then you will know that I am God!

Wow, talk about being called on the carpet. But it was absolute truth. They knew it. And we know it too, don't we, that when God identifies a practice as sin – we can rationalize all we want to, change its name from adultery to “an affair,” or cheating to “creative accounting,” or call pornography “art” – it’s still sin.

This whole issue of being returned to the land is of real importance in prophecy. We'll read about the division of the land among the tribes a little later in Ezekiel. Those of you who know your Bible know that a remnant did return to the land after the 70 years of exile; however, we don't want to miss a broader prophetic message in Ezekiel 20:35-44. Perhaps when you go home you can look at Joel chapters 2-3. Ezekiel may also be speaking of the future, now current, dispersion and regathering, much in keeping with Day of the Lord described in Joel.

Certainly we know that when Christ comes again, a time of gathering for the remnant of Israel will take place when they enter into the millennial kingdom and when, indeed, -- vs. 40 "on My holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel . . . there in the land the entire house of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them."

Well, Ezekiel may have been ridiculed as "just telling parables," but, nonetheless, God's judgment would come in the form of fire and sword. And, as God's faithful witness, Ezekiel was to "groan before them with broken heart and bitter grief." An outward expression of God's heart as Tough Love is put into action.

Nebuchadnezzar was on the march, but which to conquer first? Jerusalem or Ammon? Ezekiel is shown a signpost marking a fork in the road. Which one to take? Typically pagan societies used a number of ways to determine the will of their gods. They sought an omen (a sign). Three are given in this Scripture:

- 1) Cast lots with arrows. That could mean putting them in a quiver and letting them fall out like pick-up-sticks – the most arrowheads pointing one way or the other. Another commentator suggested the arrows were marked with names and then whirled above the head and the first one to fall out was the answer of their god.
- 2) Idols were consulted. Household idols (called teraphim) were often carried on trips. Rachel had taken one from her father's house, remember?
- 3) The liver of a sacrificed sheep was examined and the answer from a god was determined by the color and markings of the liver. No one had a very good explanation of what that means exactly, except that it was primarily a Babylonian practice. I remember seeing the practice depicted in the television movie *Masada*.

Nebuchadnezzar consulted all three methods with the same results: lay siege to Jerusalem now; Ammon would be judged later in 21:18-32.

It's hard not to stop and dwell here on the significance of a "fork in the road" for our spiritual lives. The essence, of course, is choice. We make choices every day – right/wrong, obedience/disobedience, better/best. We're guided by the intimacy of prayer, the truth of Scriptures, and the promptings of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The key is recognition of when we're at that fork in the road. Are we just bumbling

along through our day, putting one foot in front of another? Or are we aware when those situations present themselves? I have a choice – will I follow my will or God’s way? Christians should be a noisy bunch – walking thorough life with the Armor of God clanking all around us.

I remember reading somewhere that someone once prayed, “Lord, let me be a fork in the road today. Let everyone who meets me have to make a decision about You.”

Nebuchadnezzar took the road to Jerusalem. Genesis 49:10 had a prophecy, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between His feet, until Shiloh comes; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” God’s promise to Judah was not retracted as Zedekiah was removed from David’s throne, it was merely reshaped by Israel’s sin. The throne would not be restored until (vs. 27) “He comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to Him I will give it.” That is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The chapter closes with the prophecy against Ammon. Death by the sword, you will be fuel for the fire, your blood will be shed in your land. Delay in judgment does not mean you will escape judgment.

Chapter 22 begins with the Lord asking Ezekiel to confront Jerusalem’s sins. Why this punishment, why this judgment? You’ve broken every one of the Ten Commandments – and that was quite a detailed list, wasn’t it. 22:12 “And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign Lord.”

Like fires of the furnace purify metal by taking out all the impurities, so you'll be put through the fire. Only all that will be left is dross – the impurities.

I looked, said God, for someone to stand in the gap. Someone to intercede and there was no one. The princes conspire to devour the people; the priests profane my holy things; the officials kill to make themselves rich; her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions; and the people practice extortion and robbery and deny justice.

Isaiah 59:16 “He saw that there was no one, he was apalled that there was no one to intervene.”

So – you will get what you deserve.

And there's a scary thought, isn't it? Preaching the doctrine of eternal punishment in hell isn't popular these days, and I suppose it hasn't ever been. Jonathan Edwards used to preach a sermon titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in which he pictured being suspended over the pit of eternity by a narrow thread, in perpetual dander of falling into eternal destruction. John Gerstner says we try to soften the message. He says, “Modern theology has tended to take either the pain out of eternity or the eternity out of pain.”

Nonetheless, the Scriptures and Jesus, Himself, assures us Hell is true. It's what unrepentant sinful man deserves. And therein is the crux – we escape only by repentance. Only by accepting Jesus as our Savior,

acknowledging that He took ALL our sin upon Himself, and that His sacrifice alone keeps us from getting what we deserve.

Chapter 23 is an allegory of political prostitution – listeners no doubt remembered the parable Ezekiel delivered in chapter 16. The two chapters are similar. In 16 the emphasis is on religious adulterers; in 23 it's on political prostitution.

So the two prostitutes – Samaria (Oholah – means tent woman) was made up of the ten tribes of Israel (the larger portion) and Jerusalem (called Oholibah – which means “my tent is in her”) was made up of the two smaller tribes of Judah. One mother, both taken from their immoral idol worship in Egypt. Oholah lusted after Assyria and was taken off into dispersion.

Oholibah tried to be “in bed” not only with Assyria, but also the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, and Egypt. Jerusalem was seeking alliances in politics, in protection, and they had absorbed many of the idols of these countries. That, too, was a common bond. And did Jerusalem learn anything from God’s judgment on Samaria? No. They were worse – Jerusalem had God’s temple and profaned it with idols and used the holy things of God as a part of that profanity.

Therefore, we read of God’s judgment in terms of dismantling of major organs of the body, part by part, with the remainder consumed by fire and sword. That came true in 586 B. C. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.

So this lesson dealt a lot with Why. Even our last question asked, “Why do you think God goes over and over the sins that lead to judgment?”

It’s a reality check that we still need to hear today. To know our God, we have to know what to do and also what not to do. God is not capricious; all judgment has a reason behind it. But most of all it’s awareness that it’s not one time sin, but a lifestyle of sin – choosing to disregard God and rejecting all His attempts at correction or reconciliation – that brings condemnation.

Do you want to know what tomorrow holds? What’s on the prophetic horizon in your lifetime? We’re on this side of the cross – the church awaits the return of the Groom for His bride. Should death overtake us before He comes, we shall behold Him face to face as a child of God. The future of the saved is bright and secure regardless of the daily trials we endure.

History is but a prelude for the future. We need to look back. If you, or our nation, or the world continues to reject God and His warnings – the future is judgment. And then you will know that I am the Lord.