

Ezekiel 8 vs 1-18

In his first vision Ezekiel sees and warns of the coming judgement of God. In this vision he is given a view of the reasons for that judgement.

We are in times of virtual experiences. Virtual services, virtual prayer meetings, virtual choirs and even virtual pubs (e.g. The Isolation Arms, Andy Twigge, Radio Derby). Here Ezekiel, in Babylon, is given a virtual tour of Jerusalem 6 years before it's total destruction.

There is a sense of the anger of God but also of sadness that his special people had turned from him to worship a variety of idols. We read of the elders each worshipping their own idols. They presumed God had forsaken them so they were putting their trust in what they thought was more profitable! We read of women weeping for Tammuz, the Babylonian god of Spring. We all love the advent of Spring but we must give the admiration and credit to the one who created nature and sustains it. We read of men with their backs to God worshipping the sun! (v16).

Our God is a jealous God! (Ex. 20 v 5) He loves his people and feels hurt when his people betray that love for another. He was angry that his people had become idolaters, worshipping false gods.

Are we idolaters?

'If we sacrifice relationships for the god "career" we are idolaters. If we squander precious hours of our lives for the god of "entertainment" we are idolaters. If we crave the self-affirmation we get from sex or power, we are idolaters. If our self-worth is measured by our net worth we are idolaters'. (Liam Goligher)

God allowed Ezekiel to see the things he considered detestable in the lives of the people who were considered 'his people'. The Spirit works with us in the same way revealing sin that lurks in our lives. How comfortable would we feel if God allowed someone a virtual tour of our hearts today?

Let's remember our 'first love' (Rev. 2 v 4) and return to the passion and spiritual habits we had when we were second born!

'Man is only great when he acts from passion' (Benjamin Disraeli)

Ezekiel 9 vs 1-11

How often have we heard a person say that there can't be a God, because a good God would put an end to all the evil and suffering in the world? This is what the people of Israel were also saying (v9). Despite repeated promises from God that he would not, they accused him of forsaking them!

This is quite a horrific vision for Ezekiel! People of all ages and both sexes were pictured being slaughtered. We must not dumb down the reality that God is not only a God of love but also a God of wrath. He cannot accept sin of any kind but in this vision judgement falls heavy on his own people!

Imagine the anger God felt when he saw the 70 elders of the church worshipping animals and other idols (8 vs 10). These very people were the people he had entrusted the teaching of his word!

What must God feel today when he sees halfhearted evangelism, leaders denying the resurrection, toying with New Age ideas, questioning basic truths of the Bible and compromising scripture due to social pressure.

Israel thought God was not seeing their sin because they thought he'd forsaken them. (v9) Do we fall into that same false way of thinking? A mindset of 'nobody will ever know', 'everybody is doing it' or 'it doesn't matter it's only a little sin' will make sinning easier to slip into but God will see and his judgement is real.

However, in his wrath he remembers mercy. In the vision, one man goes throughout Jerusalem marking the foreheads of those who stayed faithful and grieve over the way others were treating God. These people who receive the mark are spared the slaughter.

When God judges all of mankind at the end of this world we are told that God's people will receive a mark on their foreheads (Rev 7 v 3). In the story of the Exodus, the angel of death passed over the houses whose doorposts were marked with the blood of a lamb.

As one man in the vision was able to mark and save the faithful, so one man is now able to mark and save those who entrust themselves to his sacrifice. As the blood of a lamb was sufficient to save the faithful during the Passover, so the shed blood of the Lamb of God is able to save all those who accept the truth of Jesus Christ and believe in him.

Referring back to the opening question, God has promised a day will come when he will do away with all evil and all suffering! A simple choice now could mean we would also inherit that existence!

'Now is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It won't last forever. We must take it or leave it!' C.S.Lewis

Ezekiel 10 1-21 (esp. vs 4,5, 18)

In this part of the vision we see the sad reality of the consequences of the sin and idolatry of God's people. His Glory departs from Jerusalem (v18). Jeremiah had already warned them before this vision of Ezekiel's. For an extended study look at Jeremiah 7 v 3-15. God was distressed about their hollow worship and false religion. Words like, 'This is the temple of the Lord' were chanted repeatedly with a superstitious belief that it would keep God happy! Their actions, however, did not back up their calling!

How many who profess to being God's people go through the motions in their Sunday rituals with similar belief but have no thought for their lives that should glorify God in between.

What the Jews never thought could happen is now being witnessed by Ezekiel. Jerusalem had been desecrated by their wickedness and not only does God's glory depart but he destroys the city. Biblically fire is about purification! The cherubim scatter coals on Jerusalem to purge the city of it's sin. Shortly after this vision the Babylonians actually did destroy the city by fire (2 Kings 25 v 9).

The message is clear. God can't be where sin is! He is Holy — the opposite of sin! The two cannot co-exist. It is only the covering of the righteousness given us by Christ that enables God to have anything to do with us.

The fall of Jerusalem is an act of discipline from God! He wants his people how they should be. He is passionate about their spiritual lives. Reputation, status, comfort and success are secondary to their holiness in God's eyes.

I see a broken hearted father having to discipline his children for their own good. I know how that feels! I'm sure I've said to the boys, 'I'm your Dad, you are my child. I know what's good for you!' It is echoed in Chapter 11 v 20. He wants them back in a full relationship with him. On his terms! Well he is God!

'Christian people don't do well in good days. We grow fat, flabby and lazy' Liam Goligher.

God's discipline is good for us. It also shows he cares! Trials, suffering and hardship may be God's way to bring us closer to him. Always a good thing!

'I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to reach my destination'
Jimmy Dean

Daily Devotions Thursday 14th May 2020

Ezekiel 11 vs 1-25 (esp. 22,23)

At the age of 21, I was interviewed for and appointed to a job in the Lake District. While I was there for the interview I explored and discovered a secret viewpoint that has been a private and special place ever since. Only my family knows about it! The Mount of Olives is God's special place.

After departing from Jerusalem, God's glory rests on the Mount of Olives (v23). David fled, weeping, up this mountain because of his sinful child Absalom (2 Sam. 15v30). Jesus wept on this mountain because of the sins of his created children on the day he re-entered Jerusalem to face trial for those children. (Luke 19 v 41). The resurrected Jesus ascends to heaven from this mountain (Acts 1v12) and he will return to the same place during the end times (Zech. 14v4). On this mountain he promised to be with his people always (Mat. 28v20).

This God, who cements history into place before it's happened, will bring glory back to the temple in Jerusalem in about 500 yrs time. Jesus is the Glory of God (John 1v14) and his first appearance there is when he is blessed as an 8 day old baby by Simeon as '... your salvation...' (Luke 2 v30).

In Ezekiel's vision, God's glory is removed from the temple via the east gate (v1) to the mountain of Olives. How amazing that the glory returns with Jesus via the east gate from the Mount of Olives!! God's glory is removed because of the sins of his people but returns to deal with the sins of his people!

It is sad that this mountain (Same height as the Old Man of Coniston) now has on its summit an emblem of materialism, an international hotel!

I am completely thrilled writing this. What I am discovering makes me even more in awe of God.

See what Jesus does when he comes to the temple! First he teaches the Word of God then twice he clears the temple of sinful practices. (John 12v14-16, Luke 19v45,46).

Soak up the word of God and do away with sin! (Remember Colossians?).

Ultimately he clears a different temple by giving up his life as a sacrifice for sin. Those of us who are born again have God dwelling within us. We are his temple. (1 Cor. 9 v 19)

In what Jesus accomplished on the cross we see the fulfilment of the promise in Ezekiel 11v19. This ultimate act of love melts our hearts of stone and purifies us from any entertainment of sin within our renewed hearts of flesh.

Remember Jesus's last words from the Mount of Olives. '....you will be my witnesses...' (Acts1v8)

Ezekiel 34 vs 1-10

We are going to spend a few days looking at this chapter. You may have guessed it already but I have a fondness for the sheep/shepherd relationship that frequently pops up in the Bible. If you're a sheep (and in a sense we all are) then be amazed at the love and care God has for you. If you are a shepherd, take heed of God's warnings in this chapter and in particular in this section.

Earnest Shackleton is one of the greatest leaders of all time and a hero of mine. His care was always for the good of those under him. In 1914 he set out for the Antarctic in a ship called 'The Endurance'. He had 27 men with him but they never made their destination. The ship got trapped and eventually crushed in ice. The following two years of their survival and rescue is well worth reading about. Shackleton led his men across ice, sea and land to their eventual rescue in August 1916. He kept his men busy, gave them routine, kept them physically and mentally healthy, disciplined them and eventually brought every one of them to safety. The extents to which he went to save their lives were extreme!

This is not the kind of leadership God is seeing among the leaders of Israel! Clearly, their interests are self-centred (v2). Happy to 'fleece' the sheep but not care for them. (v3)

Kings and governments are the people God has in mind. David was a good king (perhaps because he originally had experience as a shepherd). But others and, as we've seen already, the elders of the church were far from God.

I'm sure we would have no problem finding present day similarities. Be it politicians who line their pockets with taxpayers money and are more concerned with their own careers than the needs of their flock. Or it may be a church leader who is kept in luxury by his paying congregation but doesn't seek the lost or binds up the wounds of his sheep. (v4)

The leaders of Israel introduced idolatry and made foreign alliances with nations who served other gods. How our leaders today have slipped away from God's moral code and made alliances with self-interested minority groups. The confusion results in people being left to the mercy of all sorts of enemy ideas that will ultimately cause us harm. (v8)

If we find ourselves in any role as a shepherd, in church, work, politics, classroom or family then we need to be aware of verse 10. He will hold us accountable.

Do we see our leadership as a status symbol or a boost to our ego? Dig deep. Do we use people for our convenience? Ultimately we are all answerable to the chief shepherd!

Daily Devotions Saturday 16th May 2020

Ezekiel 34 11-24 (esp. vs 12,14)

God uses the term 'shepherd' to mean a leader of the people. Yesterday we saw how not to lead. Today God promises to take on the role himself and presents a picture of how to truly lead.

Shepherds in Ezekiel's time were hard men, used to all weathers and threats from wolves who sought to devour the sheep of their flocks. But they were also tender with their flocks. Before you can lead, people need to want to follow. The sheep know the good shepherd puts their needs and safety before their own. They trusted the shepherd.

Martin Luther King jr. said, 'A genuine leader is not a searcher of consensus but a moulder of consensus'. In other words popularity in itself is not as important as creating good reasons for that popularity.

We really do lack people in leadership who are confident to say what might not be popular because they believe it is right.

God, the good shepherd, presents his characteristics in these verses. One who will rescue his sheep (v12). One who will search for the lost and bring back strays (v16). This is wonderful picture language of how God cares for his people. If we are not in danger, there is no need of rescue. But we are in danger of a lost eternity. If we have wandered off to 'do our own thing', then God says he will bring us back.

Jesus says of himself, 'The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19v10). Picture yourself as his lamb when you read Isaiah 40 v 11, 'He tends his flock like a shepherd, he gathers his lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart'.

Verse 14 speaks of good grazing and rich pasture. He makes sure his flock are well fed! No matter how small the role, if we lead in church or at home, be it Sunday School, Brigades, Smarties, Lunch Club, family, Bible studies or church services our role is to feed those in our care with the word of God.

Brad Greening was pastor at Measham when I first came. He was and still is a lovely, godly man who was an inspiration and teacher to me and my family. His last sermon at Measham was based on Acts 20 v 22-36. In it we read these words, 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood'. (Acts 20v28). Brad took this seriously in those days and still prays for us all at Measham.

The role of God's kind of leader is to care for the spiritual, material and emotional needs of the flock. If we are privileged with that kind of responsibility in any way, let it be our aim too.