



Week 3: Of Wishful Thinking and Whitewash

Week 3, Day 1 – Read Ezekiel 11:1-8

Understanding the Passage

As a reminder, Ezekiel is in the middle of a vision, his second in the book (the first being his vision of the chariot). In this vision, God has transported him to Jerusalem to see the state of things in the city, and in these verses, Ezekiel sees a crowd of 25 men assembled at the entry of the Temple. Among these men are two false prophets: Jaazaniah and Pelatiah.

- Jaazaniah and Pelatiah were likely elders in Judah (they are not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament) who preached the opposite of what Ezekiel was preaching in Babylon. They preach a message of safety, security, and longevity for Jerusalem. ‘There’s nothing to fear,’ so they say, ‘Jerusalem will never fall, so don’t fret.’ These are Ezekiel’s rivals. They tell the other elders of Israel exactly what they *want* to hear, not what they *need* to hear. They are fueling the people’s denial. Jaazaniah and Pelatiah are the quintessential “yes-men.”
- Modern readers will wonder how Ezekiel knew what his opponents were preaching all the way in Jerusalem when he is in Babylon. It very well could have been the case that Jaazaniah and Pelatiah wrote letters and sent them to the exiles in Babylon (that is what the prophet Jeremiah did) so as to give a second opinion to Ezekiel’s. Either way, the writers of Ezekiel are satisfied calling this a vision.
- The piece about building houses in verse 3 is about the exiles building houses in Babylon, which is exactly what the prophet Jeremiah recommended the exiles do. Jaazaniah and Pelatiah are saying, ‘You won’t be in exile for long, so there’s no need to settle down. You’ll come home soon.’ It is a false message. The pot and meat imagery is a metaphor for Jerusalem: the city is like a cauldron with iron thick walls which cannot be overcome and the meat will never be harmed, or so they think. Again, false message.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Who are Jaazaniah and Pelatiah? What other false prophets can you name in the Old Testament? What about our culture?
Who are the “yes-men” and “yes-women” in your life? What do you wish you could tell them?
3. Have you ever told your peers what they wanted to hear instead of what they needed to hear? What should you have said?
4. Have you ever had to warn someone of consequences to their actions but they stayed in denial?

Week 3, Day 2 – Read Ezekiel 11:16-20

Understanding the Passage

This passage marks a turning point in the book. So far, it's all been doom and gloom. Here God offers hope. God will return to this hope again and again in the book like a light-hearted refrain in an otherwise dark piece of music.

The hope is: *exile will not last forever*. 'I will gather you back,' God is saying. 'The land I promised you in the beginning will be yours again. Now you are suffering the consequences of your actions; then you will enjoy the consequences of my steadfast love.'

Babylon was not the only land where Judah's exiles were scattered. They could be found everywhere. That is why the four cardinal directions (North, South, East, West) pop up frequently in the book, because the exiles, as refugees of war, fled all possible directions after Jerusalem fell. God is telling the exiles in Babylon, by way of Ezekiel, that there will come a day when all of Israel's exiles will come home. Hope means to look forward to that day when all the lost are found.

God is also saying here that his presence has followed the exiles wherever they went. God has been a "sanctuary" in all places, not just in Jerusalem.

God gives Ezekiel a glimpse into God's end-game after all this tragedy: hearts of stone will be replaced by hearts of flesh, so that the people may know the love of God. The people got in trouble because they hardened their hearts: they forgot how to love God with all of who they were, and therefore forgot how to love their neighbor. Sometimes we have stone-hearts: we find that we cannot – not will not, but cannot – love God as we should. God will give them, and us, new hearts, hearts ready for a new relationship with God, hearts ready to believe in God again.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. When in your life have you felt the darkness would last forever? What gave you hope?
3. Who in your life do you wish would come back home?
4. When have you had a heart of stone, a heart that can't seem to love God?
5. When has God given you a heart of flesh, a heart built for loving God?

Week 3, Day 3 - Read Ezekiel 12:15-20

Understanding the Passage

Just before this passage, God tells Ezekiel to perform an act of embodied prophesy, or in other words, a sermon illustration. Ezekiel will perform many of these: they are symbols acted-out. Ezekiel has to pack an "exile's baggage," the few pieces of belongings an exile would have carried during their escape from Jerusalem, and dig a hole through his city's walls, carrying his luggage through it. This action was supposed to symbolize the prince of Judah escaping through Jerusalem's walls, along with his family and guards, while the city burned around him. These are the persons whom God says will be dispersed and scattered.

God tells Ezekiel that all this is happening "so they shall know that I am the Lord." It is not a comforting thought that God would inflict pain so we might know God is God. But what God *is not saying* is that the exile is simply a means for the people to come to belief. God *is saying* that the exile is a means for the people to come back to relationship with God. It is as if God is saying, "Then they'll know I am the parent who birthed them," or "Then they'll know I am their spouse who has always loved them."

God is not interested in the people merely believing in him like a creed; God is after the relationship, and sometimes – and this is hard – we only come back to important relationships after time spent apart.

The saying goes, 'We don't know what we've got 'till it's gone.' The exiles are about to know what it is like for God not to be in their lives, like a married couple of thirty years deciding to separate for a few weeks after a rough fight. They will experience what it is like without the other person in their lives, and hopefully, they will give the relationship another try. God will be ready. Will they?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why does God tell Ezekiel to pick up baggage and crawl through a hole in the wall (chapter 11)?
3. 'We don't know what we've got 'til it's gone.' It's true. How have you experienced this?
4. What sermon illustrations have you always remembered? What is the power of symbols acted-out?
5. Have you ever had to put a relationship on pause? Maybe it was your God relationship. How did it go?

Week 3, Day 4 – Read Ezekiel 13:8-12

Understanding the Passage

Three things may be said of God's continued critique of false prophets.

- First, God will not allow them to "be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel." Before Google, before cloud drives, and before digital bookkeeping, the only records human beings could trust were those written on papyrus and stone. If your name was not written down, there was a good chance it would be forgotten. You would not be remembered by future generations. You would have no legacy. Such are the consequences of false prophets. If you willingly steer people away from the truth, God is saying, you will be lost to history.
- Second, note that God is most concerned with the false prophets proclaiming a message of peace when there is no peace. The false prophets are deceived by their optimism. They wish there was peace between Israel and God. They wish it so much they are willing to deceive themselves and their listeners. But God is finished with their wishful thinking. Now is the time for reality. It is time to wake up and taste the bitter coffee.
- Third, God likens the false prophets to "whitewashers," people who paint over the truth with weak, thin lies, like white paint diluted by water. If you have ever whitewashed something, like a fence or a wall, you know the original colors shine through the whitewash. The whitewash cannot mask the original surface. So will the false prophets' lies fail to cover up the truth of Israel's rebellion against God. Disciples of Jesus will hear the words of Matthew when Jesus calls the Pharisees and hypocrites "whitewashed tombs" (Matthew 23:27). Jesus also has a problem with people who cover up the truth with flimsy lies. Such people are no better than tombs, dead on the inside with hearts of stone.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What is the relationship between Ezekiel's whitewashed walls and Jesus' whitewashed sepulchers?
3. Why is it important that God would remove the names of false prophets from the register of the house of Israel?
4. In our culture, where do people say "Peace!" when there is no peace?
5. When have you whitewashed the truth? Did anyone ever find out?
6. How do you want to be remembered? When the next generation reads your name, what do you want them to say about you?

Week 3, Day 5 – Read Ezekiel 15:1-8

Understanding the Passage

The reader wishes this was the vine of John 15: “I am the true Vine.” We wish Ezekiel was talking about abiding in Jesus and bearing fruit and embodying love, as John the Evangelist will later use the image of the vine. But Ezekiel doesn’t have time for such warm-hearted sentiment. Judgment is coming. It’s time to act before it’s too late.

Here is another one of Ezekiel’s sermon illustrations, given to him by God. This is no grape vine. This kind of vine does not bear fruit; that is what makes it useless, good only for fuel. This is kudzu or poison ivy, the uncontrollable snakes of plant matter that climb up walls and fences and make their homes on the bark of trees. We have no use for such vines, but they can be thrown into the fire along with the wood and charcoal to make the flames last longer.

God will make the inhabitants of Jerusalem like kudzu, good only for the campfire pit. But! There is a glimmer of hope. There will be survivors who walk out of Jerusalem after it falls, though covered in soot. They will bear the burns of war, but life they will have. The remnant of Israel will be comprised of charred refugees. They will be the Community of the Burned. Jesus, the True Vine, will be a descendent of this community. He will be the Living Vine that rises from his great-grandparents’ ashes.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Explain the useless vine metaphor in your own words.
3. When in your life have you felt useless and no one could talk you out of it?
4. When in your life have you been burned, physically or spiritually?
5. Where is God raising up new life from the ashes of your past?

Questions for Weekly Discussion (based on video lesson, daily readings and reflections, and weekly sermon):

1. Of the daily Bible readings and reflections from this week, which one hit home for you, or provoked the most thoughts and questions?
2. Which passage challenged you the most this week?
3. What truths in your life or in our culture have been whitewashed over?
4. Who are the false prophets in our culture that say, “Peace!” when there is no peace?
5. Why does God tell Ezekiel to pick up baggage and crawl through a hole in the wall (chapter 11)?
6. Tell about a time when you’ve struggled with “yes-men” or “yes-women.”
7. How is Israel’s relationship with God like a strained marriage?
8. What is a “heart of stone” versus a “heart of flesh?”
9. Is having a “heart of stone” up to you? Is it in your control?
10. Why does it matter that Israel knows that God is their God?
11. Explain the useless vine metaphor in your own words.