

# The God Who Pursues

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our Father, our hearts are weak and sluggish, and so we pray that by your Spirit you would strengthen and draw us and wake us, and we pray as you pursue us we would turn to you and know you more and more. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. hearers of Ezekiel's message, this was literally true. They'd suffered a devastating geographical spiritual trauma and dislocation. They were in exile. So if you look on the second page, we're not going to go from chapters 1 to 48. We're going to look at who is God from the book of Ezekiel. On the right hand page is a map and you can see that the people of God who were in Jerusalem, many of them have been taken captive. We're at 600 BC all the way from Jerusalem to the other edge of the Babylonian Empire to this little river called the Kibar Canal. The Babylonians had devastated Judah and it took time to completely take the city, but all the top echelons had been taken off a thousand kilometres away. It was like a holocaust for the people of Israel. And underneath there are two very helpful outlines of the book of Ezekiel, the three visions or looking at judgment and then the fall of Jerusalem. And if I thought I had any chance of you doing this, I'd encourage you to bring this back week by week, but put it in your Bible and or we'll have some available at the end of next week. For those of you who are swats on the back is the whole history of the Old Testament and where Ezekiel falls in it with the divided kingdoms. Now, take this brochure, put it away.

Because Ezekiel, at the age of 25, was one of those taken off in what's called the first exile along with Daniel and he now lives in a ghetto, in a settlement on the other side of the world under the iron fist of the Babylonian army and things are going to get worse. At the 11 o'clock service I interviewed Dr. Wes Janssen.

[ 3 : 29 ] He was the choir head at Trinity Western University, gave up his tenured position, went to work in the Ukraine amongst Christians there. And he is bringing this Kiev symphony orchestra and chorus on a Thursday night to University Chapel. And he spoke about some of the suffering that the people of the Ukraine have gone through. What's not widely known is the Christians have been targeted and he described how some pastors had been captured and tortured. And the tortures were very gruesomely described to us. 300 people who have been tortured within an inch of their lives he is caring for and his ministry is caring for now in Kiev. It's a situation of great danger.

And I thought it was a wonderful interview because it gives you something of the feel of what's happened to Israel and Ezekiel. Although what's going on for Ezekiel is worse. It's not just that some insurgents have come through and beaten up and killed some people. It's not even that something like the Ukrainians have been taken captive by the Russians off to Siberia. It's worse than that.

Because Israel is not just any nation. They were supposed to be God's people. For Jerusalem to fall isn't just a psychological, physical, national trauma. It means that God has failed. God is dead. It means God's given up on his promises. Either the Babylonians are too powerful for him or he's turned his back on Israel which to them was utterly, utterly impossible.

Because now it's not just about the people of Israel. It's about God. Somehow the people of God are no longer living under the blessing of God but under his curse and under his wrath. And it's brilliantly captured in the psalm, Psalm 137 which was written at this time, you remember, by the waters of Babylon. We sat down and wept when we remembered Zion, remember Jerusalem. On the willows there we hung up our liars. Our captors required songs of us, our tormentors mirth, saying, sing us one of the songs of Zion. But how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? They can sing songs but how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

And it ends by saying, O daughter of Babylon, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you've done to us. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.

[ 6 : 12 ] The greatest surprise about that Psalm 137 is you read it through, there is absolutely no repentance or contrition on behalf of Israel. Understand? Israel believes that God has acted unjustly. They see themselves as the victims of a monstrous outrage and they're not ready to repent.

And the reason I say this and the reason we're looking at Ezekiel is because we're not just talking about remote history, 600 BC, because the exile hasn't finished. You know, we're late in the Old Testament here and I know right near the end of the Old Testament some people went back into the land and they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, they built a temple, but it was a mingy little temple. And the glory of God never came down on it. And when Jesus came, the people of Israel were still under the iron fist, this time of Rome. And the New Testament makes very clear that the world in which you and I live, the world, the Western world, the Eastern world, the Northern and the Southern world, is still in exile. The world in which you and I live stands under the judgment of God. So the Gospel, you see, reveals not just the righteousness of God for salvation, but the wrath of God against all ungodliness and wickedness. And I think that's largely what lies under the sense of dislocation and isolation in the West. It comes from the fact that we are cut off from God.

Our bones are dried up, we are cut off. It's exactly into this context that God speaks through this prophet Ezekiel. And he lifts our eyes and he humbles our heart. And as we follow through the book of Ezekiel, we are going to ask the question, who is God? There's no more important question, who is God? And today the title is, we look at the first three chapters, God is the God who pursues. He pursues us. And I've got three headings for us. Where does he pursue? Who does he pursue? How does he pursue? So the first question is, where does God pursue us? And we turn back to the first chapter and we find it's Ezekiel's 30th birthday. This is the day he's been training for all his adult life. He's been at seminary trying to be a priest before the horrors of being taken captive into exile. And now he's nowhere near the temple. He's nowhere near Jerusalem. He's by the

[ 8 : 42 ] Kibar Canal, big river canal system on the other side of the world, utterly cut off from the presence of God. And that's the emphasis. You see verse one, in the 30th year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, where was he? I was among the exiles in the Kibar Canal. The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. And then he dates it very carefully in verse two, the last King Jehoiachin. Then he says, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Kibar Canal and the hand of the Lord was upon him there. I want to say it again. It's very difficult for us to understand the trauma of exile. I mean, Israel's whole self-identity was caught up in this. God had chosen them and rescued them from slavery in Egypt, brought them into the promised land, given them the promised land, given them kings, given them his presence. God had chosen

Jerusalem and the temple and his glory had come to dwell in the temple. So as they understood it, the temple was the heart of the world, the centre of all things. And I know God had warned us over the years, they said to themselves, through his prophets of our sin and our constant wanderings, but surely God had promised he would defend us. And as long as the temple is safe, right back there in Jerusalem, we're okay, right? The fact that we've been taken off into exile, where is God in this? How could God allow this to happen? That's why, you see, verse 1 is quite dramatic. We read, There in Babylon, there in the land of exile, in the land of despair and humiliation. It is as though God has uprooted himself and gone into exile with his people. And for a moment, the veil is pulled back and God reveals his glory to Ezekiel, even in their sin and disobedience, even in their complaining and blaming God in exile. God pursues his people and he pursues them and he reveals himself to them, just as he pursues you and me today. Where does he pursue us? Well, everywhere. He pursues us to the end of the earth. There he is in Babylon. And God is revealing himself to them to bring them back to himself. He tears heavens open. He invites his prophet to see his glory, not because his people deserve it, but because God is a pursuing God. And we don't have time, I'm sorry, this week to look at the vision in the second two-thirds of chapter 1. It is stunning. We're going to come back to it in two weeks' time. But the vision of the glory of God, along with this whole book, gives us the most radically God-centred vision of reality that you could possibly imagine. It is fierce and uncompromising.

It's ravishing and it's ravaging. It's fire and storm and grace and judgment. And it puts the glory of God at the centre. And it shows the grace of God because he's not waiting for you and me to come

to a better mind or to get our act together. But he pursues us in love to draw us to himself so that we might know and share his glory. And it's very interesting. Ezekiel himself, this takes a bit of getting used to, Ezekiel himself finds it very hard to deal with. And so in verse 15 of chapter 3, at the end of the vision, we read, when the vision ends, look at 14, I'm sorry, I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit and the hand of the Lord being strong, and I came to the exiles at Tel Aviv, who were dwelling by the Kibar Canal, and I sat there where they were dwelling, overwhelmed for seven days. Nothing academic about this. It's quite shattering to see the vision of God. Intensely beautiful and personal and shocking. This is the God who pursues us and he pursues us to the ends of the earth. That's where he pursues us.

Secondly, who is God pursuing? Just turn down to chapter 2 for a moment, verse 3. He, son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who've rebelled against me.

They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn, I send you to them, and you shall say to them, thus says the Lord. For whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house, they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, I'll come back to that in just a moment. I get carried away. I want to keep going in Ezekiel.

[13:58] If you know anything about the Old Testament history, it traces the patience and grace of God with his people despite their constant defiance and refusal and disloyalty to God.

Who does God pursue? He pursues rebellious people. Seven times in this passage, they're called a rebellious house. Stubborn, restless in their stiff-neckedness.

And what it is, how it shows itself is an intentional deafness to the word of God. Look down at chapter 3, verse 4. Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them, for you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and hard language, but to the house of Israel.

Not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I send you to such, they would listen to you. But to the house of Israel, who will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me, because they have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.

See, there's this deliberate, hard-headedness toward the word of God. The problem is not a language barrier. It's a steady unresponsiveness to the word of God.

[15:15] And here is my point. It's exactly these people to whom God sends the prophet Ezekiel. It is like God telling us wealthy Christians in the West, behold, he says, I send you to speak the gospel to the West, to those who heard, the cynical, those who feel entitled toward the gospel, to this culture which feels largely entitled and hard to the gospel.

And we say to God, wouldn't it make much more sense to go to a place where people are more responsive? And if verse 6 is true, God could send Ezekiel to a different people who would hear and be more receptive and be responsive and he'd have big fruit.

God, why would you waste time on those who will not listen? It's clear that God has not read the latest books on mission strategy that are coming out of North America.

This is the current view. And that is, what we do is we find where God is working and we go there. We come alongside what God is doing so that we can have a big response.

But that idea owes much more to pragmatism than it does to the spirit of prophecy. That's consumerism. It's not faithful communication. I know there are times when Jesus calls us not to cast our pearls before swine, but in every age, God calls us to take the gospel to those who refuse to hear.

[16:47] If he hadn't, how many of us would have ever heard the gospel? And what do you say to those who are spiritually hard, who feel entitled and bored, who feel they've been unjustly treated by God, who, you know, deserve, they feel like they deserve God's blessing and they blame God for everything wrong, but they're not willing for any repentance or sacrifice in their own lives?

Well, the answer is that God gives them a vaster vision of who he is because it's only a true vision of God to cut through our spiritual illusion. Because what happens is when God begins to pursue us, we begin to see something of the emptiness and worthlessness of all the trivialities in our lives that we've been devoting ourselves to and we sense we can give ourselves to something truly weighty to God himself, the glory of God.

And when God pursues you, you know this, it's not comfortable. If we go through the book of Ezekiel, there are some of the most beautiful and tenderest words in all the Bible.

But when we come to see the glory of God, we also get this searing clarity around the ugliness and horror of our own sin and disobedience. And the first 24 chapters of Ezekiel, even the first 32 chapters of Ezekiel, are basically destroying our own illusion of innocence that we hold on to, showing us how filthy and grotesque and disgusting sin is in the sight of God and that it breaks the heart of God.

Let me give you an example. You can see how committed God is to getting through to us. I just want to take a little detour here. If you have time this afternoon, have a look at Ezekiel 4 and 5. [18:41] That's when Ezekiel begins his public ministry. But he doesn't get up and preach. What he does is he acts out a number of dramas in front of the exiles.

He's the original social medium. He mimes the judgment of God on Jerusalem. And in chapter 4, he begins a daily routine that lasts 18 months.

He takes a great big slab of clay in his garden and he draws on it a map of Jerusalem. Then he builds siege engines, hurling things at Jerusalem. And as the crowd gathers and they think he's going to be God and he's going to destroy the enemies of Israel, he takes a great big iron sheet and he puts it up to his face so that the prayers of the people of Jerusalem cannot be heard.

Every day he does the same. And he ties himself up and lies in his front yard for 390 days bound with a rope as God instructs him to live on starvation rations, on half a litre of water a day, cooking his food in excrement.

He is enacting the siege of Jerusalem, what it's going to be like. And the audience will not believe him. And at the end of the period, when it comes time for the fall of Jerusalem, he stands up and he takes a sword and he shaves his entire body, skinny emaciated body of all the hair, bunches it together, puts it on Jerusalem and sets fire to Jerusalem.

[20:11] And in chapter 5, to the shock of his hearers, he opens his mouth and explains what's been going on. I've not tried it, but Dan's going to do that next week on the Oak Street Bridge.

You'd get people listening, wouldn't you? The point is, this is God pursuing his people. Who's he pursuing? He's pursuing the spiritually calloused.

He's sweeping away our delusion of decency, the illusion of innocence that we wrap around ourselves so that we might truly know him. And I say to you, if you are someone whose heart is hard and you know you've been rebelling against God and you've got no great interest in listening and you're giving your life to all sorts of trivialities, I warn you, you're the person whose God is pursuing you.

Jesus didn't come for the righteous, but he came for sinners. In all our twistedness and our corruption and our hardness of heart. And he'll work on us until we return to him as friend, as child. Where does God pursue us? To the ends of the earth. Who does he pursue? He pursues the rebellious. And finally, how does he pursue us? Chapter 2, verse 9. When I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me and behold, that's the hand of God, by the way, a scroll of a book was in it.

[21:37] And he spread it before me. It had writing on the front and on the back and there were written on it words of lamentation, mourning and woe. And he said to me, son of man, eat whatever you find there. Eat the scroll and go speak to the house of Israel.

So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll and he said to me, son of man, feed your belly on the scroll I give to you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

This is an amazing meal. Here is the scroll of the lamentations and warnings and woe of the book of Ezekiel. And God wants Ezekiel not just stand by passively and watch the glory but to take this and to absorb it fully into his being.

Not just taste it but to feed your belly, fill your stomach with it. He says to Ezekiel, the word has to become part of you, to feed you and energise you and empower you.

But the key here is although it looks like a very bitter meal, lamentation, warning and woe, when Ezekiel eats it in obedience, the great surprise is that it becomes sweet, sweet, sweet to eat, sweet as honey.

[22:50] And some of you may be wondering why are we looking at the book of Ezekiel? I mean it's so negative, so full of judgements and warnings and it's going to be bitter to our taste. Can't we look at something more positive, uplifting and sweet?

By the way, nobody ever says it quite like that to me but you know what I mean. The point here is that sweetness only comes when we begin to see things from God's perspective and the only way

to do that, the only way to see things through his glory is by taking his word, his word of warning into our hearts right into ourselves.

Yes, there are ferocious warnings, devastating judgments in Ezekiel but it only becomes truly sweet when we take it and when we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it because it exposes the woes of our sins and our lamentable selfishness and calls us back to the living God to taste and see his goodness and grace.

So I want to say to us as a congregation we need to welcome the difficulty and challenge of this strange book. We need to take it into ourselves until it becomes truly sweet and like honey for us. And the great thing is that Ezekiel needed convincing. I read you the verse where he goes angry in 3.14 in bitterness of heat and he sits down there for a week he just sits there saying nothing but God continues to pursue him because through Ezekiel God's going to pursue his people and a week later God comes to him in verse 16 in chapter 3.

[ 24 : 28 ] The end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me son of man I've made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth you shall give a warning from me.

If I say to the wicked you shall surely die and you give him no warning nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way in order to save his life. That wicked person shall die for his iniquity but his blood I will acquire at your hands.

You only need a watchman you only need a sentry when you're under enemy attack and the job of the watchman is to watch the enemy and when they make a movement he has this awesome life and death responsibility to raise the alarm in the city so that people get up and fight and if the enemy attacks and the sentry or the watchman doesn't warn them the watchman bears responsibility some responsibility for those who die this is a model of ministry it's not the only model of ministry we're more comfortable with shepherding and pastoring and teaching and counselling but I think the great surprise here is who the enemy is if you look at verse 17 who is the enemy son of man I've made you a watchman for the house of Israel whenever you hear a word from my mouth you shall give them a warning it's not from me it's about me God himself is the enemy they have treated

God like an enemy and he is the one person you do not want as your enemy even more surprising who is it that posts the sentry it is the enemy himself it's God who chooses Ezekiel and reveals himself to him it's God who posts Ezekiel as an enemy and what sort of enemy posts a sentry against himself it's an enemy who wants those rebels to turn back to him to open the gates it's an enemy who wants peace and I think Ezekiel's role as watchman shows God's great desire for all people to turn back to him I think that's the point of the whole point of the book because a sentry is not there to destroy life but to serve the purpose of saving life God will enter judgment with us but slowly slowly reluctantly and we'll see next week it gives him no joy his desire the longing of his heart as we would turn back to him and of course it's perfectly righteous and just for God to judge rebellion and sin do you know what he does he pursues us and he pursues us with warnings until we turn to him and I want to finish with this

Ezekiel's task just as our task is utterly impossible utterly impossible so let me read you the last couple of verses of chapter three before this afternoon you go and do your homework in chapters four and five let me read from verse twenty four the spirit entered into me and set me on my feet each time the vision of God appears Ezekiel is knocked flat on his back and God tells him to get up and he can't get up and the spirit comes into him and he gets up it's like a little resurrection how's he supposed to do his ministry go shut yourself within your house and you oh son of man behold cords will be placed on you you shall be bound with them so that you cannot go out among the people and I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth so that you shall be mute unable to reprove them for they are a rebellious house it's not the way to begin a prophetic ministry is it bound and gag as one commentator said hog tied and tongue tied it's a terrible limitation and I think it shows us how much

[ 28 : 26 ] God's ways are not our ways even in the way Ezekiel is to do his ministry it reminds us of the foolishness of the cross that God's planned to pursue all people and to rescue all people comes through a man suffering on a tree and I think the greatest proof in the end that God is pursuing us is the death of his son on the cross where he pays for our rebellion and reveals the glory of grace and raises us to life by his spirit and begins to bring us home draws all those who are far off near to himself this is why Jesus came says Paul to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who

are near so that through him we may have access in one spirit to the father so we're no longer strangers and aliens fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God Amen