

The God Who Dwells

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[0 : 00] Folks, let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, amen. You can be seated. Let me add my greetings to Jordan.

Jordan's are welcome. It's wonderful to have you here. It's lovely to be here. My name is Aaron. Again, what Jordan said, if you don't have a place to go for Christmas, there's plenty of folks that would love to have you.

I think we've got a couple of... We're going to cook a ton of food. We'll have a few places at our table. If you'd like to come to our place. All right. We have come to the end of our series in Ezekiel. Pause for sad noises. Was that a woo-hoo? We've been in Ezekiel for 12 weeks. It's been wonderful and strange.

And each week, I've really felt like the Holy Spirit has grabbed me by the shoulders and shaken me and said, like, hello! Hello! What are you doing?

[1 : 06] It's been wonderful, but hard. And I thought it might be helpful, just before we get into our passage, chapter 43, to just remind you of a few of the places that we touched down in Ezekiel.

Because we didn't go chapter by chapter, verse by verse. We basically looked at the major themes throughout Ezekiel as they explained a specific characteristic of God.

chapter 18. You may remember, God says to His people, you've got to own your sin. Own your sin. The Israelites thought God was very unfair, that He was sort of capricious, or that... But their big thing is, they thought that God was punishing them for the sins of previous generations.

And God said, no, you're where you are because of what you have done. So it was a hard word from God. But the major point, I think, in that sermon, the thing that really grabbed me was like, stop blame shifting.

[2 : 11] Blame shifting is unacceptable to God. You've got to own your stuff. chapter 13. This was the... I call this the beginner's guide to avoiding salvation.

And the final point in the sermon was to avoid salvation, be sermon tasters, not sermon doers. You remember Ezekiel had become the talk of a town when he predicted something would happen, and then it came true.

Up until that point, people sort of thought he was just, you know, like a bit of a weirdo maybe. And he said something was going to happen, and it did happen, and all of a sudden, everyone wants to be Ezekiel's mate.

Everyone wants to hang out with Ezekiel. Everyone wants to... Going up to them and going, just tell us some stuff, man. Just talk to us. They wanted to have their Ezekiel experience.

And I think the challenge for us in chapter 33 was for our church. You know, we're kind of an academic kind of church, and the danger for us is that, you know, we hear a sermon, and we have a thought-provoking 25 minutes, as opposed to a life-changing one, as opposed to a heart-changing one.

[3 : 21] Chapter 16, hard to forget the great whoring passage of 2014. That was a cracker, that one. You're... It's difficult to forget this one.

This is the analogy of an abandoned baby, still with the umbilical cord of check. And this man finds his baby abandoned, just forgotten about, unwanted, and raises the baby, marries...

It's a little girl. Marries the little girl. Lavishes this girl, who's now a woman, with gifts and everything she ever wants. Jewelry and dresses and just adorns her, and she's gorgeous.

And he loves her. And her response is by prostituting herself to everything that moved. And she betrayed him in the worst way.

And this was... This was a heart-breaking passage, because it showed us that... One of the main things that I got out of this, that sin is not just breaking rules.

[4 : 25] Sin is breaking the heart of God. But the passage ended with this incredible word of grace. Because after telling this story of prostitution and betrayal, God says to his wayward wife, the man says to his wayward wife, but I choose you again.

I choose you again. Chapter 6 and 14, the title was The God Who Grieves. And we learned about idolatry and how much it grieves God's heart.

And we talked about how God has made us to be covenantal beings in a covenant with him. But because our hearts are covenantal, we will enter a covenant service with whatever captures our imagination, whatever captures our heart.

And the challenge was, what has captured your heart? Let it be Jesus. Chapter 39, we talked about the glory of God and how God's chief goal is to be glorified.

And in the passage, this glorification happens through judgment on the nations, but it also happens through the redemption of his people. We talked about how wonderful it is that one of the ways we glorify God, perhaps it's the chief way we glorify God, is being through forgiven and transformed people.

[5 : 36] When that is happening in your life, you are putting God on display. Chapter 26, we met the very naughty city of Tyre that was under God's judgment.

You remember perhaps, this was a beautiful coastal town. They had a lot of resources. They were very, very clever. And they'd used that cleverness to make lots of money.

And that's not a problem. The problem was that pride had gripped their heart. And pride says, I can take credit for all these good things in my life. It says, in fact, I'm competent to run my own life.

It says, I'm so good that I can develop a sense of self-worth and purpose in my life without God. We talked about how corrupting and empty that was and how our hearts were designed to be filled with God and yet we fill it with such small things.

Such small things like the singular pursuit of power or success or money or beauty. And how these small things just kind of rattle around in this quite large space making noise.

[6 : 49] Not giving us light, kind of just distracting us. There's a lot more sense. But it's been quite a ride, this book Ezekiel.

I think surprisingly so. And I hope you'll continue to pray about these things that the passages have brought up in your heart. And we finish here appropriately in Ezekiel 43, I think, which is, you know, these last few chapters are the high point of the book.

The gist of it, as you've heard read, is this. God gives Ezekiel a prophetic vision of the future.

Ezekiel is taken by this tour guide, you know, some celestial, angelic tour guide, to a temple.

You know, it's a vision, right? And God enters this temple and says, I will dwell here forever. That's a kind of a summary, really, of the first major chunk of it. Now, as a modern listener, you could be forgiven for not being super excited about this.

But place yourself in the heart of an exile. a Hebrew person who's been taken from their land to the other side of the world in terms of, you know, as far as they're concerned.

[8 : 02] So you're a Hebrew person. The temple, throughout the Old Testament, had been the place where God specially dwelt. The temple was a symbol, a sign, that this was God's city and that we were God's people.

So if you believe that as an ancient person, if the temple had been all of that to you and now this temple was a pile of rubble and that you had a vision of a new temple, you would be quite excited. This would be like the best thing God could show you. But the best thing, bestest, bestest thing in the passage is verse 7. God says, the temple will be made new and I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever and it's repeated in verse 9.

The passage makes a big deal about direction here. You see that at the start of this vision God returns from the east. Why is that? Because back in chapter 10 God left the temple and he left to the east.

He went east and now this promise is that he will return into a rebuilt temple. So it's a great reversal. It also says in verse 7, the house of Israel won't defile the temple anymore.

[9 : 20] It's going to be great. So this is the vision that God gave Ezekiel. It's going to be a temple. It's going to be huge. It's giving you all the dimensions. I'm going to dwell on it forever.

It's a fantastic promise. So did it ever happen? Did the temple to these dimensions get rebuilt and did the people of God get their moral act together? No.

Well, kind of no. Kind of no. They did rebuild the temple after the exile ended. Not a great temple. Herod tried to kind of flash it up a little bit but it was just ego. Nothing like described here. And did God rule over a humbled people? Well, it's a fairly good answer in Malachi. Malachi was a prophet so it's one of the minor prophetic books later on.

And it's written during the post-exilic period. So this is after the exile, right? So they go back. So they've got this new kind of budget sort of temple. It's pretty budget. It's not great. Anyway, chapter one of his book, Malachi, here's what Malachi says, paraphrase.

[10:25] He says, the post-exilic people were so lax, were so useless, he said, he just goes, I wish they'd just bought up the temple and just put them into this whole shirah.

So given that information, given the vision that huge temple dimensions, people doing well to just debacle over here, right?

Given that, what's this vision about? Okay, so you remember that Ezekiel has been a lot about judgment and destruction and warning over the first 40 chapters.

and what's God been doing? He's been shattering misplaced hopes and now he goes, I want to give you a real hope and he wants to give them a vision of an eternity with him.

Now to do that, he uses the image of a temple because it's what, because of what it represented, because it was so meaningful to the people he talked about. This was a great kindness on God's part.

[11:29] He uses something incredibly important to them to point to something far beyond what they can really get their heads around. So he uses a picture of the temple.

I'm sort of saying all this like this because it's, we're trying to understand something that's wild, eternity with God. How do you explain something that's so, how do you explain something to somebody that's completely beyond them?

I have a two month old baby boy. He can hear and he can see. How do I explain to him what it's like to eat ice cream? You know, how can I explain to him what it's like to watch the sunset?

How can I explain to him grief? God is trying to tell us about our eternal destiny. So he uses symbols and images to show us things that we just can't comprehend that well.

Now this is a common biblical sort of literary feature. In this case, I've said it's the picture of a temple to try and explain it, for example. Here's what's quite interesting though.

[12:44] Whenever the Bible does talk about future hope, using symbols and pictures, in each case, whether it's like the story of Noah's Ark, for example, the Old Testament covenants, the book of Revelations, whenever it talks about future hope, there's always three common elements.

They are place, presence, and people. Place, presence, and people. So think about the promise to Abraham, a new land, great harvests. It's always place, presence, people.

And you can see it in verse 6 and 7 in our passage quite clearly. Verse 6 and 7, While the man was standing beside me, I heard one speaking to me out of the temple. That's God. And he said to me, Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever.

So you've got this place which is the temple. You've got a people that's going to dwell in the midst. And you've got God dwelling, God's presence. I want to talk about these elements individually, just a few minutes for each, because I think it's really important that you get your head around this stuff. Firstly, the place part. In Ezekiel, the place of future hope is a temple. Later on, it's a city. Now, I do keep calling this a symbol, but it does represent a physical place that God has for us.

[14:08] Christ says in John 14, he's going to prepare a place, an actual place. on the cross to the thief, he says, I'll see you in paradise. It's a place. Our hope includes a place, a new heaven, a new earth, real, physical, tangible place.

Now, our passage points to that. Revelation 21 sort of paints it in technicolor. In that chapter, again, God trying to describe something far beyond we can experience and understand, he's attributing these physical attributes to heaven.

Try and get our head around it a little bit. And you may remember some of these attributes. One of them is, he talks about the streets are made of gold. Why is that? Why would he use these kind of symbols?

Why would he say that kind of stuff? It's interesting, you know, like you think about this. One of the most precious things in creation, gold. Something that people would die for now.

People would kill for this kind of stuff. Economies are built on it. One of the most precious things now is something you just walk on in heaven. Just walk on. One of the most precious things in the world is insignificant in the new city.

[15 : 19] It's what they use for asphalt. It's what they use for like just paving the ground. That's how amazing it's going to be. Whatever you think about heaven, whatever you picture this future to be, whatever the most amazing thing you can imagine in your mind is, it is dilapidated compared to what the reality of it will be like.

That's what that's trying to get across. This is the picture of the temple. The best thing they could tell these people was the temple. Isn't it amazing then that we exert such effort now trying to build a perfect life when the best thing we could come up with given billions of dollars and fantastic looks and perfect health would be a shabby, shabby, shabby imitation of heaven.

And it is amazing that people would risk their chance to get there by investing so much in this life. So this place is going to be incredible. So amazing, the Bible can only use symbols to explain it. Now the second element in the future promises people because you see the passage is not just a dwelling place for God. He's going to dwell in the midst of a people embodied, social, communal people.

I love Star Wars. I can't wait for 2015 just the Star Wars. There's other cool stuff going on I imagine but Star Wars would be big.

[16 : 58] But the Star Wars picture of the afterlife if you've seen her. Star Wars is a movie for those of you unengaged in popular culture.

Jordan. All right. So there's a little kid and he ends up killing people. It's terrible actually. He's the, Luke's the son.

Oh, don't worry. So the, so the, the picture of the afterlife in Star Wars is of these kind of, is this visage, this visage, you know, like this ghostly, these ghostly apparitions which are kind of there but kind of not there.

I mean that's just, and it's, you know, it's nice for effects in the movies but it's pathetic. It's pathetic compared to the Christian hope, isn't it? We'll be physical people transformed, sinless, have a look at the text when it describes the new heaven and the new earth.

It says in verse 7, just sort of at the end there it says, second half of that verse, and the house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name, neither they nor their kings by their whoring and by the dead bodies of their kings at their high places.

[18 : 15] They kind of would bury kings near the temple because there's a bit of king worship going on. Let's see what that's about there. But it's basically the main point though is this. It's going to be this, I'm going to, I'm going to dwell with sinless people.

But then in verse 10 it says, as for you son of man, describe to the house of Israel the temple that they may be ashamed of their iniquities. So God says to Ezekiel to tell the people, he says, I want you to describe the dimensions of this place and describe it really well because it represents the perfection and holiness and amazing characteristics of God and you will describe it to them and why will they do that?

What's the point of all of that? What's the point of all that? So they will feel ashamed. It's a tricky thing to talk about shame, but let me explain it like this. As they contemplate this perfect temple of perfect holiness of God, they will feel very imperfect and that is a good thing because we will not make any spiritual progress unless we start to take moral responsibility for our lives.

We will not make any progress spiritually unless we long to change. change. The older I get, the more sinful I feel and I think I'm sinning less.

I think I'm better than I was 20 years ago but I'm so much more aware of how slippery my heart is and that's good because I long to change.

[19 : 48] I long for the Holy Spirit to make me better, to make me a better husband, a better father, a better minister, a better friend. Unless we recognize that in our sinfulness, mate, no progress.

I mean this is, I've said it all quite fancily, but this is just repentance. This is just Christianity 101.

This is just repentance and that's necessary if we're to fulfill the verse 7 part here of joining God for eternity.

This is just repentance and salvation. This is necessary if we're to be reborn with new hearts. So that's us, that's the promise of people. So I've talked about place.

Okay, real, physical, tangible place. Real, physical, embodied people. Jobs, homes, and stuff on the ground. It's gold, and it's great, right?

Now, presence. Of the three elements it mentions, this is, this is the really big one here, I think. Place, physical, presence.

[20 : 56] This means that God will, himself, will be immediately, permanently, eternally, present to us all. Perhaps you have those kingdom moments in your life.

I don't know what that is exactly, but it's like a, these kind of kingdom moments where you sort of feel like, yeah, yeah, yeah, this is really cool.

That's all the time. This means that we won't experience the fragility or frustrations of this life. It means there'll be no need that will not be satisfied.

It means we'll live in a complete sense of fulfillment, security, safety, joy. And this is all because the created order is in order again.

We'll be God's people in a place in God's presence eternally. now, some, some hard questions to finish.

[22 : 05] So the great hope that God presented to his people in exile, that great hope, that great hope which I've just described, how does that correspond with your hopes?

To what you look forward to, to what you hope in? What are the hopes that motivate you? my experience tells me that counterfeit hopes invade our hearts so easily.

I think our hearts just kind of produce them very naturally. You know, I think Christmas time, Advent, this is a good time to audit our hearts and ask tough questions.

Like, when I think about my future, what am I hoping in? I have a retirement plan, that's good. I have a college fund and a special fund for my children, it's positive.

I've got other good stuff going on, I guess. Life's great, there's a fund, I've got a job, I guess I'll just keep doing that and everything will be perfect.

[23 : 19] But, you know, these are such fragile things. A bit of job security, a bit of a relationship thing going on. Like, it's more than that obviously, but, you know, like, it's so easy for me to kind of go, yeah, here's my hopes.

I'm sorted. I'm so sorted, but right, yeah, got a job, got a career, got an education. Fragile, all very fragile.

Wonderful things. But they cannot bear the weight of this life, because they are taken from us by death, by bad economy, poor decisions.

More questions. Is your heart filled with joy and thankfulness when you think about eternity with God? Do you think about it at all? Is it part of your daily thinking?

These are hard questions, I know, but they're good to ask. They're good to ask, because our hearts do wander. You know, we could live a thousand years with fame and fortune, and it would not come close to one day in the presence of God in that city.

[24 : 45] It's described in the Bible. Even when that's true, our hearts are quite slippery, I think, and they wander. And the easy life is very tempting, and it's tempting to wander from God.

It's complete madness, but it is tempting. So we must ask these questions regularly, and we must pray, Holy Spirit, reorient, reorient this thing here. John Dunn, I wrote a poem called Batter My Heart, B-A-T-T-E-R, Batter My Heart, Three Persons God.

Let me read the last couple of verses to you to finish off. Take me to you, imprison me, for I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free.

Nor ever chaste, except you ravage me. You ravish me. I read it again. Take me to you, imprison me, for I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free, nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

It's a poem about a conflicted heart, a heart that knows what it should desire, but doesn't always do that. It's a poem about a heart that cries out to be changed, and the title of it is wonderful, Batter My Heart, it finishes on this batter my heart.

[25 : 58] What a great Christmas prayer, what a great Advent prayer. And I think this is what Ezekiel's been doing for 12 weeks. With me, I think he's been doing it with us. Batter my heart, God, change me, so that my hope is in you, not just the good things you've given me.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.