

The God Who Is Our Lover

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, amen. How's everyone going?

Everyone's all right? Everyone's still here? If you're new, my name is Aaron. Jordan and I are the ministers for the service.

And if you are new, we're working our way through Ezekiel. And in the first sermon, I think maybe four weeks ago, we said that there were some chapters in Ezekiel which were regarded as too pornographic to be read in the temple back in the days.

Well, this is one of them. The English is very, very toned down. Yes, it's very toned down. I could explain it to you if you're interested, wearing a paper bag over my head, standing with my back too.

It's quite explicit. But here's what's wonderful about it. The Bible is full of images that God gives us to describe who He is.

[1 : 07] God the Father, God the Shepherd, God the King, Creator, Judge, etc., etc. Now, our understanding of God will be skewed if we rely on just one of those images.

So what we want is we want a multi-dimensional view of God, taking into account all of the images of God found in the Bible, Father, Shepherd, Judge, Creator, King.

And to that list, we need to add lover. Because that's the picture of God in Ezekiel 16. And perhaps of all of the pictures of God, all of the images of God in Scripture, this is perhaps the most gripping, the most graphic.

So let's get into it. Chapter 16, it plays out like a drama in four acts. Act 1, God the smitten lover. Act 2, God the wounded lover.

Act 3, God the just lover. Act 4, God the faithful lover. Right, from the beginning, Act 1. So here, what have we got here? Well, that's probably helpful to have your Bibles open.

[2 : 12] God here is retelling the exiles. So you remember there's a group of exiles that have been taken out of Jerusalem, and they're in Babylon, and God is speaking to them through Ezekiel.

And God here is retelling the exiles, the history of Israel through allegory. And it's actually the longest allegory in the Bible. You see, the Israelites there in exile, I mean, they hung their pride on their glorious past.

They're proud. And God just explodes, explodes that. And He says, no, you're not. You think you're so great. You think I owe you something. No, you know what?

Here's what it's like. You're actually like a baby, an abandoned baby. Sadly, this picture of an abandoned baby was common practice in those days.

Unwanted newborns were just left, exposed to die, particularly girls left in the wilderness or rubbish dumps, sometimes picked up by slave traders, but mostly just left to die.

[3 : 16] The passage says that this baby was bloody and the cord hadn't been cut yet. The normal things that you do to a newborn baby, you know, clean them up and wrap them in something and cut the cord, hadn't been done.

This is a picture of utter helplessness, complete helplessness, and complete rejection, complete abandonment. It is an assaulting image. But God comes into the field and He says, live.

He says it twice. Live. So in this revisioning of Israel's history, God gets under their pride, slips under their pride. They believe in their glorious past, their glorious heritage.

Solomon, David, Abraham, big temples, winning wars and stuff. And God says, no, there's nothing special about you. There's nothing. I chose you because I chose you and it's my mysterious grace and that's it.

You were some backwater nation. You could have been a blip on the map of the history of the world, but I chose you. And the allegory, you're like an abandoned baby that everybody walks past.

[4 : 28] So God comes into the field and rescues this baby. And you think, well, of course He would. It's the baby. Anyone would do that. Well, no, not in these days. Particularly girls, unlike boys, girls couldn't get into places of influence.

This just sounds terrible. In those days, they just weren't profitable. So there wasn't a whole lot of people rounding up all these abandoned kids, especially the girls. They were just leaving them to die. It was an accepted tragedy.

But in this amazing act of grace, at cost, at great cost, at great cost, at great vulnerability, this baby was rescued. In verse 7, we see the baby develops into a woman, into a marrying age.

So God comes back to this child that has grown into a woman and now there's the second shock of act one. If the first shock is this amazing saving act, the second great shock of act one is that the man doesn't rescue her to use her to be a maid or a slave or a servant.

He rescues her to become his bride. Verse 8, So they're talking about getting married.

[5 : 46] So they got married. Now listen to 10 to 14. It's beautiful. And I clothed you with embroidered cloth and I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you in silk and I put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck and a beautiful crown on your head and you're adorned with gold and silver and your clothing was fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth and you grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty and your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty for it was perfect through splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.

So this abandoned child grew up to be a beautiful queen. I did four weddings over summer. I think you're all here. Four weddings over summer.

I love doing weddings and it's great to be up the front sort of right where the action is. Now the only downside of it is that when the bride comes up the aisle the groom has his back to me and I can see everyone in the congregation they'll look at the bride and go oh and they'll look at the groom and they're looking at the bride and the groom because the groom's like just looks so happy or joyous or crying or something.

I love it. I never get to see it. But you know what it's like and I'm assuming it's fantastic, right? So it's written all over his face. This is amazing. You're gorgeous.

And that's the feel I get with this passage. God is this besotted lover. He is completely smitten with his bride. There is delight and joy.

[7 : 18] There's this appreciation of beauty, the sheer beauty here. It's just lovely. And let's go to an application or implication quite quickly here. When you pray, if you see God as God the Father, only God the Father, you might only see him as provider protector.

And that's going to inform your prayer life. And you should see God as provider protector. But what will happen is you'll tend to pray for stuff and safety, right?

That's perfectly good and fine. You should do that. But if you see God as lover, like he's presented in this passage, your prayers will be shot through with adoration, with joy.

Tim Keller is very helpful here. He's got this great quote related to this. And I think I've used it before. He says this. He said, Religious people find God useful. Real Christians find God beautiful.

Verse 15 summarizes what happens in Act 2. Moving on. Verse 15. But you trusted in your beauty and you played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby.

[8 : 40] You can tell a lot about a passage by looking at repeated words. Overall, the most repeated words in this passage, you can guess a whore, whoring, and prostitute.

But before we get there, in Act 1, you see a lot of I, I words. God says, I clothe you. I adorn you. I spread my garment over you. That changes in the second act.

In Act 2, the repeated frame is what? It's you took. I did this for you. I did this for you. I did this for you. Act 2, you took.

So in Act 1, God bestows beauty on this abandoned child. She grows to be a queen. And it's all because of God. And there is delight in this. There's delight. It's beautiful. It's magical.

It's beautiful. Verse 16, you took the garments I gave you and you played the whore. Verse 17, you took the gold I gave you and it basically, it says you made phalluses.

[9 : 37] Verse 20, you took the children we had together and instead of raising them and the love and fear of the Lord, you sacrificed them to pagan gods. It is arresting this passage.

And the image keeps building. It keeps climbing. It keeps climbing. Verse 25, and at the head of every street you built your lofty place and made your beauty an abomination, offering yourself to any passerby and multiplying your whorings.

Again, English is so toned down, it literally means you opened your legs to every passerby. You played the whore with Egypt, the Assyrians, the Philistines, the Chaldeans, it says. Now historically, what this is referring to is Jerusalem got into these kind of very cozy relationships with the pagan nations surrounding them.

So instead of trusting God for their safety, they made allegiances with foreign nations. They forgot how God had protected them in the past.

The result, when they did that, they kind of just invited these pagan gods into Jerusalem. Go back to the story. It says you played the whore with these foreigners and then 33, it gets worse.

[10 : 47] You didn't even ask for money. You're begging for it. You are paying people for it. You're not even, you're not even a proper prostitute, you're so desperate.

It is this picture of prolonged, frenzied, unrestrained promiscuity and infidelity. Now stepping back for a moment again, how does this relate to you?

How does this relate to us? How does it relate to me? God is telling Israel the real story of their life. They think they're glorious and awesome. And they think God is capricious and cruel for letting them go into exile.

And this, in this allegory, there's these ideas that is completely blown apart. God is cast as selfless lover in the play who rescued an undeserving abandoned child and at the appropriate time married her and lavished her with love.

And what did she do? She betrayed him in the worst, worst possible way. So we see God in a new light as lover and we see sin in a new light.

[12 : 02] What do you think of sin? How do you define sin? Off the top of my head, I kind of, you know, I would sort of go, I would think of it in terms of quite judicial terms. Sin is breaking the law.

Sin is breaking God's rules. Here, in this story, sin is breaking God's heart. Sin is betraying a relationship.

Sin is hurting God. Let's drill down a little bit more on that because I think that's really important. Sin is betrayal. And what's at the heart of that betrayal?

I've already mentioned it. Verse 15, but you trusted in your beauty. This amazing thing that God gave you, you trusted in that and played the whore because of your renown. She trusted in God.

She trusted in the good things God had given her. The beauty was God's gift. It was supposed to enhance God's own reputation like a spouse can sometimes.

[13 : 06] I know when people meet my wife, Amy, who's over there, who's gorgeous, and when they meet her first and then they meet me, I can see it in their eyes. I can see them trying to work it out like how that happened.

There's a girl at work, lady at work. Every second week, she says, no, seriously, no, seriously, like seriously. Like how did you get her to marry you? And her latest theory is some type of voodoo, as I understand.

Jerusalem's fame and glory. It wasn't just kind of like, yeah, let's just make you look pretty and, you know, that's cool. Jerusalem's fame and glory and wealth, they were supposed to point people to God.

Another thing, it's the glory of Jerusalem, because it was this, you know, it was this great city, fantastic, beautiful, and wealthy and stuff. It was supposed to be the earthly counterpart for God's glory.

In the passage, you know how it went into a lot of detail about fabric and food and stuff? Then it's not just throwing words out there, right? There's always meanings here, right? The details in the passage about food and clothing, the fabric is the same fabric that you'd find, that you found in the tabernacle.

[14 : 20] And the food is the same kind of food you found in the tabernacle. So it's sort of saying Jerusalem was supposed to be like the priesthood to the nations around it. Jerusalem was supposed to be the means by which they could know God.

And they stuffed it up, didn't they? They sullied it. That's a better word. They sullied and muddled it. Again, so what's this got to do with you? Folks, how you live publicly matters.

Glorify God, but how you live. But I think more importantly, and I'll spend just a minute on this, God has given you abilities. Perhaps he's given you strength, beauty, talents, resources.

Goodness me, there is a great temptation to make the gifts of God the object of trust.

You know this, right? You know this. Verse 15, she trusted in her beauty instead of God who gave her that beauty. There is a great temptation to make the gifts of God the objects of trust.

[15 : 34] And I think this is a common snare for God's people. And the more gifted you are, the greater the temptation. A great teacher who trusts in their mental ability.

Or the evangelist who trusts in their one really slick talk. Or the bigger than life pastor whose congregation grows and he or she begins to think, yeah, that's me.

I'm doing that because I'm so awesome. The successful business person, entrepreneur, the gifted student, the beautiful person. These are good things God has given you.

Wonderful things that you should be thankful for. But do not make them ultimate things of trust in your life. Folks, do not prostitute your gifts. It breaks God's heart.

Those were gifts from him. So use them, enjoy them. But they're not your ultimate source of hope, are they? They can't be.

[16 : 34] So don't use them for selfish gains. Use them to glorify God. One more implication, verse 20. Were your whorings so small a matter?

That you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them. This is talking about real, real child sacrifice. For us today, I mean, I think the application is very clear for us.

Our children suffer as a result of the idols that we worship as parents and as a community. you know, if my idol is, you know, if I think I just need to maximize my wealth in my life, it's going to affect my kids.

The belief that individual freedom is the highest virtue, the commitment to a life of maximum pleasure, your children will inherit the consequences of that idol worship.

You are sacrificing your children to other gods when you do that. When we do that as a community, it's affecting our kids. Right then, who's having a good time?

[17 : 49] Everyone doing well? Do we need a break or are we doing okay? Act one, God, the smitten lover, the besotted lover.

Act two, the wounded lover, the betrayed lover. Moving on, act three, the just lover. These last two I'll do very quickly.

Verse 35 to 43, it says that God judges. In this section, you know, at the start there, there's an outline of charges and then there is a judgment and the judgment's very full on.

What I want you to notice is that it's, God is very committed to judgment and what's interesting about this is the former lovers now they come as, so the former lovers of this woman now come as enemies to destroy her.

That's exactly what happened historically, of course. We know this, right? So Jerusalem was destroyed by the people that they tried to cozy up to. This woman, Jerusalem, you know, didn't believe God was enough to protect her.

[18 : 59] She sought allegiances with other nations. those nations ended up destroying her. So she's kind of in a hell of her own making. Does that make sense? That's very tragic.

Before moving on, you may notice there's something here. The repeated word in this little section, naked. There's a lot to talk about there. It's actually the same word as exile.

That's no coincidence but I want to talk about something else quickly here. The judgment here is less about punitive judgment and more about exposure. So God is trying to strip away this idea of Jerusalem the golden, Jerusalem the great, Jerusalem the glorious and replace it with Jerusalem the undeserving recipient of God's amazing grace.

And that's the narrative, that's the tape deck, that's the operating system that you should have in your brain. Okay, act one, God the smitten lover.

Act two, God the wounded lover. Act three, God the just lover. And finally, and again quickly, act four, God the faithful lover. Verse 59 and 60, for thus says the Lord God, I will deal with you as you have done.

[20 : 14] God has committed to judgment. I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant. Yet, and this is one of the biggest yet's in the Bible, yet, I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant.

And that's just incredible, isn't it? That's just remarkable. So there is judgment on Israel, but that's not the end of the covenant.

God has the last word in the story, this allegory, and the last word is a word of grace. God says, ungrateful, destroyed Jerusalem, he says to you, I choose you again.

I choose you again. I will keep choosing you. That's the narrative I want you to get in your head. You sin.

You mess up. You wonder if God's going to keep loving you. Why do I bother? Why do I keep bothering? I'm such a mess.

[21 : 29] God says, I choose you again. I choose you again. Let me finish on this. You may say, yeah, but why didn't he just let Jerusalem off the hook? Why the whole judgment thing?

Because that was pretty full on. Why do they need to get punished? Because we get to know who God is when he treats sin as it deserves to be treated and when he chooses not to.

And that's no more clearly seen than on the cross. So on the cross you see the justice of God. Sin has a cost. It's the cross. And on the cross we see the mercy of God.

Sin has a cost but we didn't pay it. So God deals with sin as it deserves to be dealt with, with death, but in his amazing grace, his son is the one who's up there paying that price.

The cross, like this passage, is incredibly confronting to us. And here's why it's confronting. Because it says two things that don't sit with us well.

[22 : 34] And I'll finish on these two things. One, you are far worse than you think you are. Two, you are far more forgiven than you can imagine. Amen.