

Home

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 May 2015

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] If you'd like to obey your heads and pray with me. Gracious Father, we ask that you might send your spirit to us now as we have your word in front of us so that as we hear, give us this blessing we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. On the eve of a desert storm in January 1991, President Bush Sr. said it was America's responsibility as the leader of the world to protect Kuwait.

It would seem from that statement that the United States had a particular view of itself. Before they, and I think that view flows out of a little bit of their history, because they had won the Second World War, they were the economic powerhouse of the world at the time and they had Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Maybe there was a culture of arrogance and presumption that they would always be on top of the world. Is it justified? When you think about in reality, in terms of the world history, they had been a world player for about 90 years.

In that time, they were defeated in Vietnam. They'd been sorely bruised in Korea, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan. And yet you get a sense, if you've ever visited the United States, that there will always be on top of the world.

[1 : 31] Part of it is also of their theological framework, where, like on their banknote, in God we trust, but the assumption is that God is always on our side.

We are the good guys against the bad guys. Now, United States, in the grand scheme of things, might not be justified thinking the way that they do, but two and a half thousand years ago, God's people did.

They had, in fact, had the promised land and they had been on top of the world for a thousand years. Something that Hitler wanted to do. And Israel had been there for a thousand years.

And maybe they thought they were always going to be on top because in the middle of their capital, Jerusalem, stood a temple. And in that temple, God ruled and God would never allow his city to fall. Such was their arrogance and their complacency and apathy as the people of God. It, in fact, came to an abrupt ending, as we saw last week in 597 BC.

[2 : 36] The Babylonians swept through Judah, captured large elements of the aristocracy and the academics and the leaders, and they took them off to Babylon, one of which was Ezekiel.

And so the question is that, well, what's going back in Jerusalem? What's happening back there in Jerusalem? How are they getting on? Those who weren't deported, how are they getting on? Well, as it turns out, they thought that everything was still okay.

As I mentioned last week, there are people like the prophet Hananiah back in Jerusalem saying things like, don't worry, be happy. We've still got the temple. It's still there. God's still with us.

We'll never be defeated. Those who were deported were probably the ungodly ones. It's a terrible arrogance. Because as we discover here that all is not peace and safety back in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel is commissioned. We're doing basically chapters 2 to 32 today. So it would be great if you had your Bibles in front of you.

[3 : 42] And my extensive reading is going to be hopefully packaged down into something slightly over 30 minutes today. So have your Bibles in front of you. Ezekiel is commissioned in chapter 2.

He is told that what is in front of him is an extremely difficult task. In fact, it says that if he'd been called to be a cross-cultural missionary, it would have been a whole lot easier job than being the pastor of these people.

It says this in chapter 3, verses 5 to 7. You are not being sent to a people who are obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel. Not too many peoples are obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand.

Surely if I sent you to them, they would have listened to you. But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you, because they are not willing to listen to me. For the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate.

The message of these chapters that we're scanning today is that God is angry with his people. They are hardened to his word.

[4 : 53] And in chapter 16, you can see why God was feeling the way he was. You don't need to move there. I'll give you a bit of a picture. He paints a terrible picture in chapter 16 of this relationship between God and his people.

The story there in chapter 16, the analogy is of a baby. A little baby girl that's cast aside in her birth. She's been born and thrown aside into the bushes. She's still covered in all the muck from birth, crying out, just dumped there, uncared for, unloved, abandoned.

And then God comes along and takes up this little girl. He washes her. He nurtures her. He protects her and comforts her. Nourishes her as she grows up. God, watch this little girl grows up into her childhood and then into adulthood.

And God adorns her with jewellery and lavishes love on her. But instead of love and appreciation and faithfulness in return, she becomes a prostitute.

She, in fact, rejects her divine lover, if you like. And so God feels like the husband's scorned, the rejected husband.

[6 : 04] Chapter 8, flick over there, describes, if you like, how their unfaithfulness to God works itself out. But the first three verses reveal that Ezekiel receives visions of God, where he's taken from the Kibar River to Jerusalem.

And he gets a vision of what God wants him to see back in Jerusalem. And he's taken to the temple in Jerusalem. He's shown three things in the temple in Jerusalem. The first is in verse 5.

Then he said to me, son of man, look towards the north. And so I looked. And in the entrance north of the gate of the altar, I saw this idol of jealousy.

And so he's standing inside the north gate. Ezekiel looks to the north as instructed. And he sees what is most likely the statue of a Canaanite mother goddess.

A crude Canaanite symbol of fertility. It is referred here as the idol of jealousy. Because if Ezekiel had instead looked to the south, he would have seen, standing there in the opposite from this idol, in full view of this idol, a symbol that represented God's presence in his place.

[7 : 25] You see, Yahweh, the husband of Israel, joined to her by solemn covenant, had demanded exclusive allegiance from his people.

Exclusive devotion. And yet, like a brazen hussy, she was openly committing adultery in his house. In fact, in the living room of the house, in full view of her husband, as it were. Then down in verse 10, Ezekiel has shown another thing.

So I went in and I looked and I saw portrayed all over the walls, all kinds of crawling fiends and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. And so, not only this crude fertility symbol, but in God's temple, Egyptian animal gods are being worshipped.

It also says there, linked with that, that while they are appearing, there are priests there while appearing to perform service to Yahweh, each one of these priests, the elders of the people, are pursuing their own personal idols and preferences in his house.

[8 : 36] And so, bit by bit, Ezekiel was just more shocked by what he saw. Behind each door of the temple, gradually, God was bringing him in, showing him more and more detestable things.

He showed another thing in verse 16. So, step by step, God is bringing his prophet Ezekiel closer to the central sanctuary of the temple, the holy of holies, and God draws Ezekiel's attention to a group of men, standing, most likely the priests again, standing on the very threshold of the temple buildings.

This is the place where these people would normally plead to Yahweh for the pardon of the people for their sin.

Forgive us, Lord, for our idolatry and our arrogance and our sinfulness. And here they are, standing there, but instead they've got their backs to the altar, and instead they're looking to the east and they are worshipping their son.

Verse 17 sums it up. Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do detestable things they are doing here?

[10:16] Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose. Now that last phrase is pretty difficult to understand, but it most likely means they're a stench to my nose.

Instead of being in the temple and in their worship, being a fragrant offering to the Lord, they are a stench to his nose.

They're rebelling against God, they've got their backs to God, they're prostituting themselves with God, and they're doing it all in the name of their religion. And it stinks, is what God says.

And so in chapter 9, the glory of God is avenged. It was what was read out to us a moment ago.

And it is a terrible chapter that describes God devastating his people in judgment.

In verses 1 and 2, we're introduced to seven soldiers. These are not human soldiers. They are seven archangels whose normal function is to defend God's people.

[11:28] And here they are, given new orders. Their job now is to, in fact, stop protecting God's people and to attack God's people. It is to execute judgment on them.

And then we notice something happens in verse 3. This is, take note of verse 3. Now the glory of the Lord of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple.

Notice that. Notice that point. It's the first step of God withdrawing from his people. And what happens when God withdraws from his people?

Verse 5, Five, the seven soldiers execute judgment on them. Without showing pity or compassion, slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark.

Notice verse 4. The godly are afforded protection. Then the Lord called to the man, clothed in linen, who had the riding kit at his side, and said to him, Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are doing in it.

[12:44] Notice the criteria that God uses to instruct these men to distinguish between those who receive judgment and those who receive the mark.

Notice the criteria. It is those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done. That's the difference.

What God expects of his faithful people in days of national, moral, and spiritual degeneration is descent. That's what he expects of his people.

He expects us to emphatically reject the values and the practices of a pagan, irreligious, secular world. That is, a refusal to be conformed by them.

He looks for a measure of disgust and a deeply felt sense of horror and outrage of what is happening in his world. A feeling of distress and grieving and lamenting.

[13:48] Let me just clarify that, what I've just said. God is not impressed by Pharisees. What God seeks are people who express their rejection and their moral outrage not by a sanctimonious, holier-than-thou attitude but by an agonizing sorrow of heart.

A person who has an agonizing sorrow of heart actually recognizes there is, in fact, solidarity in all sin. That is, I am a sinner too.

That is, they feel ashamed and disgusted with their society rather than simply for their society.

When you're disgusted with your society, you will do whatever you can, like we looked at last week, Jeremiah 28, 29, I can't remember exactly where it is, seek the blessing of the city.

You will work for God's glory in the city. When you're disgusted for your society, you withdraw away from them and have your little holy club. And the picture here, as we can see, moving to chapter 10, goes from bad to worse.

[15:23] As the slaughter continues and the fire takes hold, Ezekiel watches the glory of God makes its next move in departing from the people. Chapter 10, verse 4 describes what we already know.

God has moved from the most holy place to the edge of the temple precincts. Then down in verse 18, then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim.

And then there's a further move in verse 19, while I watched the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance to the east gate of the Lord's house and the glory of the Lord of Israel was above them.

And so the unthinkable has happened. God has left his temple via the east gate. God is not there. It is shocking. And notice what happens when God leaves through the east gate. Standing at the east gate is a group of pompous men engaging, they're engaged in planning their future, apparently unaware of the mayhem in the city that's soon going to be upon them.

[16:42] They are there complacently assuming their safety. When the Lord himself, their only possible protector, passes straight by them as he exits the temple and they didn't even notice.

How easy it is to be so involved in religion and not have God, not even notice that he's not in it. how easy it is to sing the songs and pray prayers and say confessions and not even notice that God's not in it.

And then in chapter 11, flick over there, chapter 11 verses 22 to 23 comes the final move. Then the cherubim with the wheels beside them spread their wings and the glory of God of Israel was above them.

The glory of the Lord went up from within the city and stopped above the east, the mountain east of it. The glory of the Lord went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.

[18:03] We are to conclude from there that it was from that east mountain that the glory of the Lord departed from his land. And with his departure from the mountain east of Jerusalem, God handed his city and his nation over to be destroyed and it happened in 586 BC.

Nebuchadnezzar had had enough and so had God. Do you remember what I said last week? That I said that the whole prophecy of Ezekiel is bookended by by one word.

It is the Lord is there. In chapter 1 verse 4, even in pagan Babylon, God was there for his prophet Ezekiel.

And the last phrase of Ezekiel names the city where God permanently dwells with his people. It is the Lord is there. And these chapters here that we've just read out to us in chapter 9 especially is a picture of what happens when God is not there.

The glory of the Lord has departed and so chapter 9 is barbaric. It is awful. But perhaps it is only by painting such a barbaric and a gory scene that the reality of God's judgment can be brought home to us with sufficient emotional force.

[19:40] Ezekiel doesn't just want us to think about this message. He wants us to feel its reality. Multiply this massacre in chapter 9 millions of times and you get something of the reality of the nightmare of hell.

Hell hell is where God is not for all of eternity. It's not just a matter for debate.

It's a reality to be felt. My friends, the plight of the lost should profoundly disturb us. It should drive us to your knees.

See what Ezekiel does in response to the slaughter in chapter 9? Verse 8, while they were killing and I was left alone, I fell face down crying out, Oh, sovereign Lord, are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?

Even the prophet expresses identification with the people under judgment. Are you going to destroy all of us? He feels the burden of judgment and it moves into crying out.

[21:05] I don't believe that we can speak about judgment without praying for mercy. And if we can speak with judgment without praying for mercy, I don't believe we've actually felt the weight of judgment in our own hearts.

God's judgment is and so friends, let us not forget here that judgment begins with the people of God. It is their sin that has been exposed and they are now faced with a choice here.

They can either be moved in grief and repentance for their sin or they can brazenly deny the truth, mock the messenger, harden their hearts against God and further their rebellion.

No doubt it is a terribly painful and a threatening thing to be faced with personal sin. There is a fear, I believe, in us all that our true sins might be exposed and therefore our reputation might be heart-tarnished.

to be confronted with sin is a devastating encounter with reality. When God really reveals the blackness of our hearts, it is devastating.

[22:32] It is a ruthless ripping away of our mass of pretense, mass that are so easily put up with religion, but it is also a profoundly defining moment with our relationship with God.

In that moment we are faced with a stark choice. One option is to fall face down before God in grief and shame and be comforted only by the humility and repentance that led the psalmist to plead, remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.

According to your love, remember me for you, O God, are good. How could the psalmist make that request?

Because he was secure in the reassurance that if you, O Lord, kept the record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.

And so their option, two options, fall down in repentance, second option is to continually move stubbornly in sin, ignoring all warnings and all pleadings and face the consequences to fall on those who arrogantly unrepent.

[24 : 04] that is the choice that we face today. Did you hear my prayer when I began? I wasn't just trying to make a filler here so that we're lined up with the Mandarin congregation.

As we open your word today, do not harden our hearts. That is the choice that we face.

Whenever we are challenged by other people or directly by the Holy Spirit over our sinful actions.

So, friends, perhaps even today as we've read God's word, these scorching chapters, maybe our hearts have been moved to a more profound awareness of the sin that lurks in the hidden recesses of the present of our hearts or the past of our hearts.

Perhaps we have been convicted by the idolatry that is our drive consistently for security in the West. Maybe the flirtation with sexual license that we call freedom.

Maybe the arrogance and the complacency and the false security that feed off our relative wealth and comfort. If the Holy Spirit has exposed any parts of our hearts, past or present of sin, then deal with it as such.

[25 : 26] Do not like the exiles, blame other people or blame God. Do not, like so many today, explain it, excuse it, or try to put it into some kind of modern perspective.

Sin is sin and when it is exposed, we are left to one of two mutually exclusive alternatives, repentance or hardening. And so today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as Israel did.

for those of us who are acutely aware of the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin, aware of failure, desiring to walk with the Lord with confession, repentance and obedience, and you're feeling the weight of their sin, there is something absolutely essential that you need to hear from this text.

It is true that there is anger in God's heart that will bring judgment, but there is also pain and a great desire for reconciliation.

There are, in fact, glimpses of hope in these chapters as well. Back in chapter 3, for instance, when God commissions Ezekiel as his mouthpiece to his people, he says this to them, to him, to Ezekiel, son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.

[27 : 03] Ezekiel there is called a watchman by God. A watchman is needed only in times of danger. They're the person who stands on the city wall as a lookout and warns the city of any enemy approaching.

That's their job. They push the alarm button. And so there's a profound irony here. As the watchman for Israel, Ezekiel is being appointed as such to that position by Israel's enemy.

It is God who is Israel's enemy at this point, but it is God who puts Ezekiel in the position of watchman in that place to ring the alarm bell to tell the people of his hostile intent.

And this tells us that while God is glorified in judgment, he never delights in the destruction of the wicked. You see, God's anger is not one of his eternal attributes.

It is a function of his holiness. sin. His anger comes into existence because of sin and his anger is quenched when sin is dealt with to his satisfaction.

[28 : 32] His love, on the other hand, is an innate divine attribute, which is why the psalmist says in number 30 verse 5, his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime.

There's also further hope in chapter 11. Right before the glory of God makes his final departure to that mountain east of Jerusalem, he makes this promise in verse 17, chapter 11.

This is what the sovereign Lord says, I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.

They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them. I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.

Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people and I will be their God. what God promises there before his final exit, he says, I will return.

[29 : 50] He promises to return. He promises to be there again. And true to his promise, five centuries later, the glory of God came back.

John 1.1 says, in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. And then down in verse 14, it says this, this word who is God, this word became flesh and he made his dwelling amongst us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, the glory which departed five centuries earlier, has come back, and he has come from the father full of grace and truth.

So who is this word? Who is God? Who is this word? Who has come to us? Who is this word? Who is full and grateful of grace and truth? Verse 17 tells us, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. God returns in all his glory to fulfill his promise in the person of Jesus Christ. God but as the glory of God departed unnoticed by most so it came back unnoticed by most.

[31 : 13] John says he was in the world and the world was made through him and the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own but his own rejected him.

Even the historic people of God rejected him just like they did in Ezekiel's day so they did it again when he came back to Jerusalem they rejected him again.

But instead of taking up his sword and executing God's judgment on the streets of Jerusalem again this time he took up a cross. He willingly turned God's anger away from his rebellious by placing himself under the white hot judgment and anger of God for the sin of the world.

And as he climbed up that hill and hung on that cross for the sin of the world he cries out in a loud voice my God my God why have you forsaken me?

As his judgment fell the father turned his back on his son. God was not there for him.

[32 : 34] But when God's anger for our sin was satisfied he was there three days later when he brought Jesus back from the grave triumphant over death and the consequences of Christ taking up that cross and not his sword is as John writes a little bit later for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Those who mourn their sin have a safe refuge from that sin and its consequences in Jesus and so if that is you you are marked with the sign of the cross and as a little bit of information the mark that was placed on the foreheads of the people in Jerusalem in Ezekiel's day was a Hebrew symbol for the cross.

If you're someone who mourns your sin and feels the weight of your sin you are marked with the sign of the cross you are safe in him and so remember this some 40 days after Jesus rose again he departed again the glory of God departed again in exactly the same place it did five centuries earlier just east of the city of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives and as it departed it didn't part in judgment this time it departed with blessing and he says to his disciples surely I'm with you always to the very end of the age God is here with us now Amen