

What God Promises - Ezekiel 16: 1-6, 8-15, 59-60, 62-63

If the sermons preached in our churches were movies and were given the appropriate rating, I think it's fair to say most sermons would rate a 'U' (General Audience) as there is little, if anything to offend people, young or old. Yet today's passage, if we are to be faithful to it, requires a '15 or 18' rating because it is quite unpleasant, shocking and even we may feel offensive to our ears.

Of this chapter, Spurgeon once said that *a Minister can scarcely read it in public (p215 Duguid)*. Another writer on this comments *'With graphic imagination and violent force, Ezekiel strips away the popular fiction of 'Jerusalem the Golden' and replaces it with the figure of 'Jerusalem the Prostitute'. Here we have an exposé of Jerusalem's true nature, with the prophet taking the part of prosecuting counsel in the divine courtroom. (p209 Dug)*

So with this health warning in mind, let's now look at Ezekiel 16, and as we journey through the challenges of this chapter, we will discover it has a promising and encouraging conclusion so do listen out for this.

To sum up, Ezekiel 16 can be described as an 'all out - in your face' condemnation of Jerusalem. Ezekiel has been told by God in v2 *to confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices*. Here the references to Jerusalem refer both to the physical city **as well as** the people of Judah for whom Jerusalem was their capital. Ezekiel begins reminding the people of the origins of Jerusalem - v3 we read: *your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite*.

From despised beginnings and then likened to a growing girl in verse 5, where we read *No one looked on you with pity or compassion...rather you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised, to being a place of life* in verse 7, where we read *I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew and developed and entered puberty. Your breasts had formed and your hair had grown, yet you were stark naked...*we discover that Jerusalem was transformed into an established Canaanite city in its own right, all the result of God's blessing upon it - blessing that began before David captured it and made it his capital!

As one Bible Commentator says of verses 4-14, *God did for the girl what no one else had ever done, washing off her blood, anointing her and clothing her (16: 8-9) in a threefold*

reversal of the circumstance of her birth, where she was not washed, anointed or clothed (16:4). God provided her with a wardrobe fit for queen, with embroidered dresses and shoes of fine leather (16:10). This is not merely elegant or royal clothing, however. She is clothed in materials that are elsewhere associated with the tabernacle, underlining her symbolic identity as the home of the temple. (p211 Dug). Adorned with the very best jewellery (16:11-13) and given the finest food (16:13), she grew into a beauty, famed throughout the known world (16:14). This description is associated with the kingships of David and much of Solomon's.

But in verse 15, everything changes as Jerusalem forgets who it is that has blessed her. Like the prodigal son, she squanders all that God has given her in wild living, and the fine gifts that had been given to her by God, she now uses both to make idols, and to worship foreign gods. She is repeatedly described as engaging in prostitution. How many of you would like the church to be described like this?

What we need to realise is that the use of such language has its roots in the writings of the prophet Hosea, where he describes the northern kingdom of Israel as a foolish promiscuous, adulterous woman who has forsaken her true love - God. The key difference however is that Ezekiel's Jerusalem, the southern kingdom, descends into even greater depths of depraved, degraded behaviour and detestable practices. We read of some of these in verses 20-21: *You took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols.*

Then in verses 23-25 - *Woe! Woe to you declares the Sovereign Lord. In addition to all your other wickedness, you built a mound for yourself and made a lofty shrine in every public square. At every street corner you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, spreading your legs with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by...*

Where Jerusalem was meant to be a light and a blessing **to** the surrounding nations, it had instead forsaking her true love, resulting in becoming an adulterous people, just like the surrounding pagan nations. This was to have severe consequences which we read of in verses 40-41 *They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords.*

They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution and you will no longer pay your lovers.

In case anyone thought this punishment was too great, verses 44-59 then describe and contrast Jerusalem as living in relationship with two sisters: Samaria, the northern Kingdom of Israel and Sodom in the South. Sodom, who had been completely destroyed along with her sister Gomorrah, and who had been a byword for abomination in the ancient near East and Samaria, the northern kingdom of Israel who was destroyed by the Assyrians, both on account of their sin and wickedness.

Verse 47 tells us that Jerusalem not only *followed their ways (i.e. that of Samaria and Sodom) and copied their detestable practices, but in all Jerusalem's own ways, became more depraved than they.*

In other words, Jerusalem's sin was even greater than theirs! As one Bible commentator says of this: *Jerusalem is surrounded by sinners and fits naturally into their company, delighting to go along with the crowd (p213 Dug).* Hence why they ended up in exile - God dealt with Judah as they deserved because they broke his covenant.

Yet God doesn't forget them - instead He makes a promise to them - not because of anything they could ever do, but because of his covenant. Verse 60 read: *Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.*

God never forgets his promises and stands by them, even when people and nations are brought low. What is more, we learn it is not the people who will make atonement, it is God himself who will make atonement - v63 we read: *Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

As one Bible Commentator says of this: *The nations of the world will view Jerusalem as an object lesson of the wideness of God's mercy. On the day when the Lord makes atonement for Jerusalem, she will remember and be ashamed, her tongue will be stilled and her pride humbled once and for all. (p215 Dug)*

Shortly we come round the Table of our Lord when we remember the atonement God made, once and for all in his Son Jesus Christ, for everyone. As we do, we need to remember afresh just how much it cost Jesus to make atonement for us all - abused by his captors, flogged, forced to carry his cross until he could no more, nails forced through his hands and feet whilst complete conscious (with no aesthetic!), left to hang there, dying a criminal's death...it is an ugly, bloody 18 rated scene. There is nothing nice about his death!

Yet it is by his blood, that our whole identity now changes because we discover who we truly are! From being like the people of Sodom and Jerusalem, we are called and transformed by God's grace into his sons and daughters! Hallelujah!

My challenge to each of us today is that as we share in broken bread and wine outpoured for us, let us see with our own eyes and recall in our hearts all that Jesus has done for us. Let us examine our lives and ask for his forgiveness. Let us then live out our lives in such a way that the world sits up and takes notice, knowing that God's atonement is for all people - there is no one beyond his grace - everyone can be restored, if they truly repent and turn to him.

As we sang earlier in the service:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!

To every believer the promise of God;

The vilest offender who truly believes,

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear His voice!

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!

O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son:

And give Him the glory! Great things He has done.

Amen? Amen!