

Ezekiel 6

- In chapter 6 of Ezekiel we move forward in studying the consequences of God's judgment against Judah and Jerusalem
 - Last week in chapter 5 the Lord explained the consequences that would come against the people in the city
 - We learned that two thirds would die but a third would be exiled
 - And from among these groups the Lord promised to preserve a remnant of believing Israel
 - That remnant would still experience the earthly judgments, since those judgments were required by the Old Covenant which bound all Israel
 - But they would be preserved through the judgments as a testimony to God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant
 - Today the Lord address the consequences to the land of Israel
 - Specifically, the Lord explains how He will bring judgment against the high places of idolatry in Israel

Ezek. 6:1 And the word of the Lord came to me saying,

Ezek. 6:2 "Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them

Ezek. 6:3 and say, 'Mountains of Israel, listen to the word of the Lord God! Thus says the Lord God to the mountains, the hills, the ravines and the valleys: "Behold, I Myself am going to bring a sword on you, and I will destroy your high places.

Ezek. 6:4 "So your altars will become desolate and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will make your slain fall in front of your idols.

Ezek. 6:5 "I will also lay the dead bodies of the sons of Israel in front of their idols; and I will scatter your bones around your altars.

Ezek. 6:6 "In all your dwellings, cities will become waste and the high places will be desolate, that your altars may become waste and desolate, your idols may be broken and brought to an end, your incense altars may be cut down, and your works may be blotted out.

Ezek. 6:7 "The slain will fall among you, and you will know that I am the Lord.

- Ezekiel's charades are done for now, so the Lord asks him to speak to the people plainly

- Nevertheless, Ezekiel is still delivering the message with flair
 - Ezekiel is told to turn and face the direction of Israel
 - So that as he delivers his prophecy, he is speaking as if addressing the mountains themselves
 - But as we see, the Lord isn't angry at the land itself
 - He's promising to destroy the "high places"
- A high place is any place of Canaanite idol worship and particularly of sacrifice
 - When Israel entered the Promised Land under Joshua, the land was occupied, of course
 - But the occupants had been judged by God as worthy of destruction
 - The Lord told Abraham centuries earlier that a day would come when his descendants would receive the Canaanite land
 - This would happen when the Lord's patience over the Canaanites' sin reached its limit

Gen. 15:12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.

Gen. 15:13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

Gen. 15:14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

Gen. 15:15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.

Gen. 15:16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

Gen. 15:18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying,
"To your descendants I have given this land,

From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

Gen. 15:19 the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite

Gen. 15:20 and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim

Gen. 15:21 and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite."

- The Lord promised that Abraham's fourth generation of descendants would occupy the land of Canaan
 - But before they could take possession of that land, they must displace and destroy the Canaanite inhabitants
 - These peoples were idolators who committed great sin for many centuries
 - But once their iniquity was complete, as the Lord said to Abraham, they would come to an end
- But in the years that followed, the people of Israel failed to heed the Lord's command to defeat the Canaanites and possess the land
 - As a result, the nation found itself living side by side with the idolatry and evil of the Canaanite people
 - Over time, the people adopted the Canaanite idols
 - And they substituted idol worship for worship of the true God of Israel
 - Evil kings of Israel and Judah set up high places across the land to encourage the people to worship false gods
 - In that way, Judah incorporated idol worship into the very landscape of Israel
 - On hills and mountains, on cliffs and ravines, by rivers and valleys, altars devoted to false gods dotted the landscape of Israel
 - The very first of these high places was set up by the tribe of Dan during the time of Judges
 - In the beginning, these high places were not centers of idol worship but rather Yahweh worship
 - The tribe of Dan had migrated far north away from their assigned territory and into new lands
 - Since the people were now living so far from the tabernacle, they didn't want to make the long trip back to worship at Shiloh
 - So they set up a graven image of God and declared they would worship in Dan instead

- Then over the centuries, the idea caught on
 - Jews who preferred not to make the long journey back to the tabernacle as required in the Law set up their own high places
 - Soon these high places dotted the land
 - Jews were practicing various forms of false worship at altars on every hill, mountain, ravine, etc.
- And then other worship practices began to change as well
 - These worshippers were not believing Jews – they were not the remnant – so their evil hearts continued to lead them astray
 - Having already set aside the Law concerning where to worship, it was a small step to then change how they worshipped
 - In time they adopted the pagan gods of the Canaanite people living around them
 - Altars were now dedicated to Baal, Molech and other pagan idols
 - Jews agreed to be “priests” to these false idols
 - In addition to altars, whole temples were erected to these false gods
 - Then prostitution was practiced in these temples as part of the “worship”
 - Sacrifices graduated from merely animals to infants
 - Within a few generations, the nation’s religious practices were indistinguishable from the surrounding pagan people
 - Reading through Judges, 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings, you can see idolatry in Israel progressing over about 500 years
 - Under Solomon’s rule, these high places gained legitimacy
 - Later, evil kings in the northern and southern kingdom embraced false worship
 - At times a good leader might rise up to to put a stop to these practices
 - But even then, the high places often remained

- In time, the reforms would be forgotten and the people would return to their evil practices
- It's hard to believe how pervasive idolatry became in Israel, especially when we remember how the nation came into their land in the first place
 - God revealed Himself to the nation in miraculous ways
 - He performed miracle after miracle leading them out of Egypt and into the promised land
 - He did further miracles under Joshua and the Judges
 - He gave them the Law and the feasts to remember these things
 - He gave the nation great blessing in David's day
 - And under Solomon, He made Israel the most power nation on earth
 - So how did they stray so far away from the Lord?
 - Remember how it started
 - First, they moved away from the Lord
 - They left His presence and left His word
 - Then they began to listen to the world's counsel and to their own selfish, evil heart
 - The rest followed naturally
 - That pattern has never been any different
 - If you feel far from God, it's not God Who moved away; you did
 - Like the tribe of Daniel, you've moved away from God, from spending time with God's people and in God's word
 - And you've gone so far that now you tell yourself you have reasons why you need to do things your own way
 - Before long, church is for other people, the Bible hold no attraction and your life resembles the world
- Idolatry is a seductive thing...it draws us in quietly so that we rarely see it coming

- Remember, high places in Israel began as alternative places to worship Yahweh
 - The Jews who built these places still wanted to worship the God of Israel
 - But they wanted to worship on their own terms
 - But that one little compromise was the wedge the enemy needed to pry their hearts away
 - Before long, they were worshipping pagan idols
- Each step they took away from the word of God made the next one easier to take
 - That's exactly how it works for us too
 - Rarely will a Christian move from a faithful walk with Jesus one day to complete rebellion and apostasy the next
 - Instead, we make one small compromise today and another tomorrow
- If left unchecked, we soon end up in a bad place wondering how we got there
 - As things bottom out, we ask ourselves when was the last time I went to church?
 - When was the last time I prayed or opened my Bible?
 - Why am spending so much time in the company of ungodly people?
 - How did I filled my days with so many worldly pursuits?
 - How did my life get so messed up?
 - Where are you Lord?
- You may never have thought of these things as idolatry, but it is
 - You don't have to bow your knee to a wooden statue to be guilty of idolatry
 - You only have to set up high places in your life, things that substitute for obedience and devotion to the Lord

- We establish our own ways to finding satisfaction, protection, provision rather than relying on the Lord and His word
- The Hebrew word for idol is literally translated “dung god” and that’s what we’re talking about
 - We tell ourselves that the waste products of our consumption are our gods, our high places
 - The things we consume by whatever lustful appetite we indulge, become our masters, our dung gods
- Do you have a high place? Well ask yourself where do you turn when you feel vulnerable, when you feel empty, when you feel hurt?
 - If that place isn’t your prayer closet or the word of God
 - Or if can’t be found within the fellowship of God’s people...then you’ve discovered your high place
 - That place needs to be taken down because it stands between you and your walk with Christ
- Israel didn’t want to remove their high places because they had hard, unbelieving hearts
 - High places were the consistent feature of the land which stood to condemn the people
 - So now the Lord declares He will remove them personally by bringing a sword against them
 - Specifically, He will use the Babylonian army to accomplish this task
 - As that army moved through the land, they came upon Jews worshipping at high places
 - As they engaged these groups in battle, the Lord gave His people over to the Babylonians
 - The Babylonians were enraged against the people of Israel
 - This would be the third time they had to march into the land to subdue the people
 - They’re so angry this time that they are determined to crush any and all opposition

- As they advanced the army tore down every altar it found and killed those worshippers gathered there
 - The dead were left unburied
 - Eventually their bones lay scattered around the altars where they once worshipped
- This outcome was be a bitter irony
 - Israel worshiped these idols expecting to receive favor
 - They expected their idols to grant them fertility, abundant crops and protection from their enemies
 - Instead, both shared the same fate
 - Israel idols were crushed and the people died
 - These so-called gods couldn't save themselves much less protect Israel
- Historically, this was a turning for Israel
 - In the past when a good king put an end to idol worship and took down the high places, the reforms never lasted long
 - Before too long, the people rebuilt the high places
 - The people returned to idolatry and the word of God was forgotten again
 - But after the Babylonian conquest of Judah, Israel never again returned to these things
 - Wherever they've existed, whether in the land of Israel or outside the land, the Jews remained true to the Law of Moses
 - Never again were high places established in Israel
 - Never again did the nation embrace idolatry
 - Even today religious Jews are generally faithful to the Law and reject idolatry
 - This is remarkable departure from Israel's past
 - Why hasn't the nation fallen back into idolatry as it did so many times before?

- Why did things change?
- The Lord gives us the answer in the rest of the chapter

Ezek. 6:8 “However, I will leave a remnant, for you will have those who escaped the sword among the nations when you are scattered among the countries.

Ezek. 6:9 “Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations to which they will be carried captive, how I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes which played the harlot after their idols; and they will loathe themselves in their own sight for the evils which they have committed, for all their abominations.

Ezek. 6:10 “Then they will know that I am the Lord; I have not said in vain that I would inflict this disaster on them.”

Ezek. 6:11 “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Clap your hand, stamp your foot and say, “Alas, because of all the evil abominations of the house of Israel, which will fall by sword, famine and plague!

Ezek. 6:12 “He who is far off will die by the plague, and he who is near will fall by the sword, and he who remains and is besieged will die by the famine. Thus will I spend My wrath on them.

Ezek. 6:13 “Then you will know that I am the Lord, when their slain are among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the tops of the mountains, under every green tree and under every leafy oak – the places where they offered soothing aroma to all their idols.

Ezek. 6:14 “So throughout all their habitations I will stretch out My hand against them and make the land more desolate and waste than the wilderness toward Diblah; thus they will know that I am the Lord.””

- In v.8 the Lord mentions His remnant again, which brings us back to last week’s lesson
 - Last week we learned that the Lord intended to preserve a third of the people of the city
 - He preserved them by scattering them into the nations of the world
 - Among that group will be the remnant, a believing group of faithful Israel who were caught up in the judgments
 - Now we begin to understand how the Lord brings good things out of this tragedy

- The Lord says in v.9 that those who survived and were scattered would testify to this experience
 - The remnant of believing Jews would understand that their ancestors had grieved the Lord's heart by their idolatry
 - They will recognize that these terrible things were justified and they had no one to blame but themselves
 - They will come to loathe their sins and abominations and to repent from them
- Because of this powerful experience, the remnant of Israel would "remember" the Lord among the nations
 - To remember the Lord before the nations means the Jewish people would remain faithful to the Lord wherever they lived
 - They would keep the Law, celebrate the feasts and observe a weekly Sabbath while residing in the Gentile nations
- Notice in v.10 the Lord adds that these disaster wouldn't come upon Israel "in vain"
 - He means that these terrible events will accomplish a lasting good for the sake of God's people
 - First, they will recognize they brought these things upon themselves, as the Lord says in v.11
 - More importantly, it will lead the people to recognize they have but one true God
 - Notice the phrase "then they will know I am the Lord"
 - It appears three times in this passage, in v.10, v.13 and in v.14
 - In fact, that phrase appears 65 times in this book, because that was the problem
 - This nation had walked away from God and forgotten Him
 - They needed to KNOW the Lord was the only God
 - And through these one-of-a-kind judgments, the Lord left leave an indelible impression on His people
 - So they would come to know He was the Lord

- The Lord says it will take Israel dying on every high place to accomplish this transformation
 - On every mountain and hill, and under every tree where Israel placed an altar, bodies would lie as testimony to the Lord's wrath
 - By the magnitude of the disaster, future generations would be saved from wandering into the same mistake
- Boy, what a hard way to learn a lesson, isn't it?
 - We're starting to understand why God's judgment was so harsh
 - They sinned against their God in the worst ways possible and did it repeatedly
 - Until the Lord has no choice but to act in this way to correct the problem
 - He was acting to preserve His people from annihilation
 - It's fair to say that had God not take such drastic action, then instead of a third of Israel remaining, there would have been none
 - There still would have been people living in the land, but they would have ceased to be Israel
 - By sacrificing two third, the Lord was able to bring one third through a trial that resulted in a lasting faithfulness
 - That is a very hard way to learn to be faithful to God
 - Now we live under the grace of the New Covenant
 - So we may be tempted to think that the Lord could never responds this way to us
 - But be careful
 - The word of God tells us that since we have been given an even greater covenant, we have an even greater obligation to live obediently

Heb. 10:23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

Heb. 10:24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,

Heb. 10:25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Heb. 10:26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

Heb. 10:27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.

Heb. 10:28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Heb. 10:29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Heb. 10:30 For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.”

- The writer reminds his Christian audience we must hold fast our confession without wavering
 - But if we should waver – that is if we waver in our pursuit of Christ just as the Israelites wavered in following the Lord God
 - Then we can expect the Lord to respond
 - The writer asks if failing to keep the Old Covenant resulted in a penalty of death, then consider what follows for the apostate New Covenant believer?
 - He doesn't answer his question because he wants us to think about it
 - If those who violated a lesser covenant received such a severe penalty, then we shouldn't be playing around here
 - We are in a blood covenant with the Creator God, and that relationship brings unfathomable blessings
 - But it also brings an obligation to live in the light of what we've received
 - So how do we meet that obligation?
 - The writer says it starts by doing the very things Israel neglected
 - Stay close to the Lord and to His people
 - Serve Him in good deeds and love
 - Don't be drawn away to high places of one kind or another