

Ezekiel 8

- Today we start a new division of the book of Ezekiel
 - The storyline is changing in dramatic ways
 - Previously, we studied how Ezekiel was commissioned and called as a prophet in the midst of Judah's exile
 - And how the Lord asked Ezekiel to communicate difficult news through pantomime and with strong words
 - This morning we begin a four-chapter section that explains why and how the glory of God departs from Israel's temple
 - Chapters 8-9 give the reasons why God's glory must depart
 - And Chapters 10-11 explain His departure in several stages
 - It's a fascinating account for several reasons, but especially because it illustrates the Lord's patience with His children
 - And it foreshadows the Lord's ultimate plan to redeem Israel
 - That's a fact we need to keep in the back of our minds as we move through the early chapters of this book
 - The bad news comes up front in Ezekiel's book, but the back end of this book is all good news
 - The Lord sends His people away for a time so that He may bring them to glory in the end
- So let's get started in Chapter 8, which begins with God's explanation to Ezekiel for why His glory must depart the temple in Jerusalem

Ezek. 8:1 It came about in the sixth year, on the fifth day of the sixth month, as I was sitting in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell on me there.

Ezek. 8:2 Then I looked, and behold, a likeness as the appearance of a man; from His loins and downward there was the appearance of fire, and from His loins and upward the appearance of brightness, like the appearance of glowing metal.

Ezek. 8:3 He stretched out the form of a hand and caught me by a lock of my head; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in the visions

of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the seat of the idol of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy, was located.

Ezek. 8:4 And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the appearance which I saw in the plain.

Ezek. 8:5 Then He said to me, "Son of man, raise your eyes now toward the north." So I raised my eyes toward the north, and behold, to the north of the altar gate was this idol of jealousy at the entrance.

Ezek. 8:6 And He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations which the house of Israel are committing here, so that I would be far from My sanctuary? But yet you will see still greater abominations."

- For a second time, Ezekiel receives an audience with the glory of God
 - The prophet dates the event precisely, which helps us understand the setting much better
 - He says this happened in the sixth year on the fifth day of the sixth month
 - Remember, these dates are all in relation to the original date given at the start of the book
 - Chapter 1 is dated to the fifth month of the fifth year of exile
 - That means these events are happening with ten days remaining in Ezekiel's fourteen-month duty of laying on his side
 - So he's still on his side next to the model of Jerusalem's siege
 - But he's not alone
 - The elders of Judah have assembled around him
 - These elders are the ruling men of the tribe of Judah, a government in exile
 - So it would seem that Ezekiel's antics worked as intended
 - He got Israel's attention for the message
 - Though the elders probably haven't been persuaded concerning their sinful ways, at least they're listening
 - That's all the Lord expected for now...but as we'll soon see, He has more to say about these elders

- In that moment, Ezekiel experiences the hand of the Lord “falling” on him again
 - Ezekiel has another personal moment with the glory of God, something we can’t possibility appreciate beyond what little Ezekiel provides
 - He sees a “likeness” of man
 - By likeness, Ezekiel means it wasn’t literally a man though the character shared similarities
 - The “man” had fire for a lower body and bright glowing metal for his upper half
 - What Ezekiel saw was a representation of God, something the Bible calls the Shechinah glory of God
 - As we discussed in Chapter 1, the Shechinah glory of God is *not* God but rather a physical manifestation of the invisible God
 - You might compare it to a flag fluttering in the wind
 - We can’t see the wind...it’s invisible
 - But we can see the movement of the flag which tells us that wind is present in that moment
 - Likewise, this manifestation isn’t God but it tells us that God is present in this place
- Jewish rabbinical teaching has always struggled with any suggestion that God can manifest Himself in human form
 - In fact, one rabbi famously taught that Jews were not allowed to reflect on Ezekiel 8:2 because it suggested something offensive
 - Naturally, then, the Pharisees were especially offended when Jesus equated Himself with God
 - But the rabbis failed to appreciate that these OT manifestations were not God Himself and therefore they did not diminish God
 - God merely manifested himself as a cloud and a burning bush and lightening and as a dove to communicate His presence, not His form
 - And if God can manifest Himself using these lesser members of Creation, then certainly He can take the form of Man; His greatest creation?

- So having appeared to Ezekiel, the Lord now directs Ezekiel's attention back to Jerusalem to witness events taking place at the temple
 - In v.3 the Lord catches hold of Ezekiel by a lock of hair on his head
 - Then the Spirit lifted him up between earth and heaven, which means in the air between the ground and the stars
 - But this was not a literal lifting, because Ezekiel says he was brought to Jerusalem in visions of God
 - We might say the Lord took hold of Ezekiel's attention
 - This moment is a perfect example of the ministry of the Holy Spirit
 - The Holy Spirit plays a specific role in the Godhead
 - He works in the hearts and minds of mankind to direct our attention to the things of God
 - Spiritually speaking, the Spirit literally takes hold of us
 - First, He calls us into a relationship with Jesus, gifting us to serve our Lord and sealing us for our day of redemption
 - Next, He brings us the revelation of God from the word of God
 - Things we could never see or know unless and until the Lord revealed them to us
 - Finally, He encourages and empowers our hearts into obedience to things we learn
 - He convicts us of our sin and strengthens us for our walk with Christ
 - Previously, we saw the Spirit come upon Ezekiel calling him into service and equipping him for his mission as a prophet
 - Now, Ezekiel is experiencing the Spirit in His role as revealer and teacher
 - The Spirit is revealing things to Ezekiel that he couldn't have known otherwise
 - The Spirit takes Ezekiel to the north gate of the inner court of the temple in Jerusalem

- Solomon's temple was a large ornate building on top of Mt Moriah in Jerusalem
 - The building itself was a tall rectangular structure with a single entrance facing East
 - Around that building was a fence creating an inner courtyard
 - That courtyard had gates at various points around, including a gate on the north side
- About 60 years before Israel's captivity, an evil king named Manasseh set up a pagan idol at the entrance of this northern gate

2Kings 21:1 Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Hephzibah.

2Kings 21:2 He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel.

2Kings 21:7 Then he set the carved image of Asherah that he had made, in the house of which the Lord said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever.

- Notice that as the Lord shows Ezekiel this idol, He refers to it as the idol of jealousy
- He means this idol has provoked the Lord to jealousy for Israel's worship
- Jealousy seems like an odd word when applied to God, because we commonly use the word jealousy to describe a sinful human response
 - Therefore it seems out of place to describe God as jealous, yet we remember the Lord Himself said He was a jealous God

Ex. 20:3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.

Ex. 20:4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

Ex. 20:5 "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,

Ex. 20:6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

- Jealousy can be a sinful response or it can be a righteous response
 - Coveting for something we are not entitled to have is sinful jealousy
 - Desiring for something we have every right to possess is a righteous jealousy
 - So when a man covets another man's wife, his jealousy is sinful
 - But when that woman's husband reacts to the other man's advances in jealousy, that's righteous jealousy
- The Lord is jealous for His people, and He has every reason to expect us to give Him our affections, our worship and praise, and our faithfulness
 - He has given us everything
 - He loved us before we knew Him
 - He pledged Himself to us in the blood of His Son and gave us the downpayment of His Spirit
 - He has lifted us up with Christ in the heavenly place, assuring us a part in Christ's inheritance
 - He has done all of this to praise of His glory
 - So yes, He has every reason to ask for our devotion and faithfulness in return
 - In a day to come, when we are glorified in the Lord's presence, it will never dawn on us to give our attention to anyone or anything else
 - We will be captivated by His glory, His love, His wisdom and His power,
 - We will worship Him exclusively in joy
 - The Bible even describes you and me, as we're engaged in that worship

Rev. 4:8 And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.”

Rev. 4:9 And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever,

Rev. 4:10 the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

Rev. 4:11 "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."

- That scene describes a future event, a time when you and I will be present in the throne room of God
 - And as you hear, we will be engaged in full-throated worship of the Lord
 - No distractions, no hesitation, no worries over who is watching
 - And no temptation to worship anyone or anything else
 - But for now, we will struggle in our dedication to the Lord from time to time
- When we do stray, it's usually because we've put something between us and the Lord
 - Some person or desire or pursuit becomes a greater attraction to our heart than knowing and serving and pleasing the Lord
 - In Manasseh's day, worshippers seeking the true God had to first pass by that false god standing at the northern gate
 - That idol was their distraction, a diversion that became a stumbling block
- Therefore, it offended the living God who says He will not share His glory with anyone
 - Notice Ezekiel says specifically in v.4 that the glory of God was in this place
 - He's referring to the Shechinah glory of God occupying the temple in the Holy of Holies
 - This is one of the greatest honors Israel has ever known: the glory of God dwelling among the people of Israel

- The glory of God first occupied the tabernacle of Israel while Israel was in the desert with Moses
 - In fact the word Shechinah in Hebrew is similar to the phrase "I will dwell"
 - The Shechinah glory of God is His presence dwelling among men, and Israel was honored and blessed by that presence
- Later when Solomon built the tabernacle, the glory of God moved from the tabernacle to the Holy of Holies in the temple

1Kings 8:10 It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the Lord,

1Kings 8:11 so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

1Kings 8:12 Then Solomon said,

"The Lord has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud.

1Kings 8:13 "I have surely built You a lofty house,

A place for Your dwelling forever."

- Solomon's prayer was for the glory of the Lord to forever occupy the magnificent temple he built, but that was not to be
- At this point in history, the glory of the Lord has remained in the Holy of Holies since the days of Solomon, about 340 years
- Even more remarkable, the Lord remained in His sanctuary despite one abomination after another
 - I believe the Lord points out His presence in the temple to Ezekiel to make the point that the Lord is indeed long-suffering with His people
 - The Lord is long-suffering with us too
 - And we should take great comfort in knowing that; He doesn't give up on us or walk away from us
 - But don't take His presence in your life for granted
 - God wasn't giving up on Israel either
 - But He is prepared to withdraw His presence for a time

- We'll talk more about that consequence when we get to Chapters 10-11
- For now, the Lord wants Ezekiel to see the full extent of Israel's abominations so that when He acts, there can be no doubt that His judgment was justified
 - The Lord shows Ezekiel five examples of the sin Israel committed in His presence in the temple
 - Beginning with this idol standing by the north gate
 - The north gate was the gate through which animal sacrifices entered into the court of the temple
 - As a result, the idol has defiled the temple court and the sacrifices that entered into it
 - Certainly, Ezekiel would have known of this idol standing in the temple and I'm sure he disapproved of it
 - But now he's learning how much the Lord despised it too
 - The Lord says that this idol is forcing the Lord to be far from His sanctuary
 - The Lord's glory cannot be united with idolatry, as Paul says

2Cor. 6:16 Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

"I will dwell in them and walk among them;
And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

2Cor. 6:17 "Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord.

"And do not touch what is unclean;
And I will welcome you.

- God says this idol was reason enough for God's glory to depart the temple
 - But the abominations continued...

Ezek. 8:7 Then He brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, a hole in the wall.

Ezek. 8:8 He said to me, "Son of man, now dig through the wall." So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance.

Ezek. 8:9 And He said to me, “Go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here.”

Ezek. 8:10 So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts and detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around.

Ezek. 8:11 Standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each man with his censer in his hand and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising.

Ezek. 8:12 Then He said to me, “Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, ‘The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.’”

Ezek. 8:13 And He said to me, “Yet you will see still greater abominations which they are committing.”

- Ezekiel is led through a hole in the wall into a room in the temple compound
 - It appears as if this entrance was secret and known to only a few
 - But God reveals this entrance to Ezekiel
 - And inside Ezekiel witnesses a crowd worshipping every creeping and detestable thing carved on walls
 - Not just any pagan gods, but gods in the form of creatures declared unclean in the Law
 - These were likely Egyptian gods, since Egypt uniquely patterned their gods after such creatures
 - And even worse, the worshippers were led by Israel's seventy elders
 - The ruling class of the nation leading a secret society of evil operating in a dark room in the temple compound
 - They thought their secret satanic cult was secret
 - They told themselves the Lord didn't know either
 - They declared the Lord had forsaken the land
 - But as I've said, when you feel God isn't around, it isn't because God moved away...it's because you did!

- This second abomination is greater than the first because it involved worship of Egyptian gods by Israel's leaders
 - Remember the Lord formed this nation in the beginning by a great exodus out of Egypt defeating those gods through great plagues
 - And now the leadership have returned full circle to worshipping those same idols while doing it inside the Lord's house
 - But there is more...

Ezek. 8:14 Then He brought me to the entrance of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and behold, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz.

Ezek. 8:15 He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? Yet you will see still greater abominations than these."

- Now the Lord brings Ezekiel one step deeper into the temple, going past the north gate and into the inner court
 - At this entrance, women were seated weeping over Tammuz
 - Tammuz is an ancient pagan god
 - He goes by various names among different ancient cultures
 - Tammuz is also known as Adonis among the Greeks
 - Worship of Tammuz was essentially worship of nature, something we might call New Age today
 - He was the god of spring vegetation, so he was known as the dying and rising god
 - For just as spring vegetation dies in the fall and rises again in the spring
 - This abomination is worse than the previous idolatry because worship of Tammuz involved use of prostitutes in the temple
 - The women were weeping as part of their act as prostitutes
 - They wept as a display to invite a man to take them
 - So clearly, this perversion is worse than idolatry by itself
- But a worse abomination follows...

Ezek. 8:16 Then He brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house. And behold, at the entrance to the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men with their backs to the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east; and they were prostrating themselves eastward toward the sun.

- Now the Lord has taken Ezekiel to the doorway of the temple building beyond the altar
 - In this area of the temple, only the priests of Israel were permitted to stand, so these men must be priests
 - And these priest of the God of Israel are standing with the backs to the temple and facing east as the sun rises
 - And they are worshipping the sun as it rises
 - Moreover, at any given time there were exactly 24 priests serving in the temple
 - So because Ezekiel sees 25 priests, this means that the high priest of Israel has also joined in this sun worship
 - The door of the temple always faced east, so entry into the temple required moving from east to west
 - You may remember that in scripture the direction east stands for sin while the direction west stands for holiness
 - Therefore, facing east means turning toward sin and away from God
 - And they worshipped the sun, which was specifically prohibited in the law
- Now we see a further progression of sin, from the common people to the leaders to those who serve in the temple including the priests and high priest
 - Any one of these sins was reason enough for the glory of God to leave the temple, but He waited patiently for Israel to repent
 - But now the time has come for the Lord's glory to depart from the temple
 - As the Lord announces to Ezekiel

Ezek. 8:17 He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they have committed here, that they have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly? For behold, they are putting the twig to their nose.

Ezek. 8:18 "Therefore, I indeed will deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor will I spare; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I will not listen to them."

- The Lord asks rhetorically are these offenses too light to deserve the Lord's response?
 - Obviously they are not too light
 - In fact, they are well deserving of a response
 - But when you think about it, what response do they deserve?
 - Don't they deserve complete destruction? Don't they warrant the Lord completely turning His back on Israel forever?
- The Lord even says they are putting the twig to their nose, which is a colloquialism of that day
 - It was an obscene gesture in that day and it represented mocking someone
 - Israel is mocking God, daring God to respond
 - Bringing such sin right to the doorstep of the temple and daring God to do something about it
- In light of that arrogance, God would have every right to wipe them out
 - But He doesn't do that, despite what replacement theology may try to say
 - Yes the Lord acts in wrath and judgment, especially against this generation, as He says in v.18
 - But He doesn't wipe out Israel
- In future chapters we will see the Lord promising not to bring Israel to its end
 - In Jeremiah, who wrote about the same period of history, the Lord says:

Jer. 29:11 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.

- What kind of God is so loving and patient and merciful that He could speak to Israel in that way even in the midst of her sin?
- He's the same God we serve, the same God ready to forgive us and grant us another chance to please Him
- He is the same God Who is faithful to us...even when we are faithless