

Day 224

Jeremiah Speaks Out Against the False Prophets

Jeremiah 23.9 – 40

When anyone claims to speak in God's name, they are taking on a heavy responsibility. Jeremiah's sorrow and anger are both provoked by those who call themselves prophets, yet are not living God's way, nor pointing people towards the Lord.

Jer. 23.9-14 Jeremiah is distraught by the sorry state of the faith of the Lord (YHWH) in Judah. In particular, the prophets, the mouthpieces of the Lord, are perverting His words and causing people to live in sin.

Jeremiah is reminded that the northern kingdom of Israel, under Ahab and his descendants, permitted the worship of the fertility idols alongside the golden calves of Jeroboam. But now, among the Judeans, people are not being challenged in their idolatry and perversion of the Lord's truth.

Jer.23.15 – 24 Because of this, the prophets will bear full responsibility for their misdirection. Jeremiah instructs the people not to listen to those who claim to prophesy, because they are driven by their own imaginations. The test of the falseness of their words is simple – they are endorsing by their utterances lifestyles and behaviour which are inimical to the ways of the Lord. They are promising peace to the selfish, and safety to the stubborn.

Jeremiah reminds them that the true purpose of the Lord is to remove this evil from the land, forcibly. If the prophets had told the truth, people would have been rejecting these idolatrous ways and following the Lord. Therefore, these are not prophets of the Lord.

The Lord reminds Judah that He is not just limited to a room in the Temple; there is nothing hidden from Him, the One who fills all things with His presence.

Jer.23.25-32 The prophets are telling their dreams as though they were the word of the Lord. Their dreams focus on their own interpretations, and draw the attention and focus away from the Lord. How easy it is in the realm of the visionary and the supernatural to make ourselves the centre of attention, to glorify the man or woman instead the Lord. But these are just random dreams which the prophets are speaking out. If they were from the Lord, the words would carry weight enough to change hearts and wills, whereas there is no benefit at all from their words.

Jer.23.33-40 Jeremiah is calling an end to the practice of people seeking out prophets like they would seek out fortune-tellers. When the prophet is asked, 'What is the key word from the Lord for me (the Hebrew is the word *massa*' Heb.מַסָּא meaning 'burden') they are to say – 'there isn't one, The Lord is refusing to speak to us in that consumerist way.'

What is happening is that the prophets are confusing their imaginations and emotions with the word of the Lord, and this is misleading people. Because of this, the Lord will

cut off the false prophets, and they will join the bitter loss coming upon Jerusalem shortly.

The prophetic word, even today, is such an important vehicle for the Lord to His people. But it must always, always be tested against the Lord's intentions for His people and for the world. How much of what we hear spoken, or even speak ourselves, is to make one another feel better about ourselves, and how much is to turn us from the selfish bent of our hearts to yield all constantly to follow Jesus Christ? The only true Word of the Lord, as Jeremiah points out, and which still holds today, is that which produces in people the conditions for the Kingdom of God to move ahead unhindered. It is not a vehicle for personal soothsaying and fortune-telling.

Day 225

Babylon Will Not Always Control

Jeremiah 51.59; Jeremiah 50.1 – 40

The Lord is careful through Jeremiah to make known that, although Babylon is going to be the instrument of His judgement against Judah, He does not condone their oppression . They in turn will reap the harvest of God's righteousness, when He comes in right-wising power to overturn their tyranny.

Jer.51.59 Jeremiah consigns a message to an officer of the Judean army who is being deported with the King and court to Babylon. The officer's name is Seraiah Ben Neriah.

Jer.50. 1 – 10 Although Babylon now has the upper hand, her day will come to be captured and overthrown; her idols Bel and Marduk will be shown to be no support, as the Medes and Persians come and end her period of power.

At this point, Judah are to look for their deliverance. There will be a turning to the Lord, a repentance and renewing of the covenant. When Babylon falls, the Jews are to make ready to come home, as the Medeo-Persian alliance rises to centre-stage in the region, in some seventy years' time.

Jer.50.11 – 18 Babylon will be turned into a ruin, because of her part in destroying the Lord's people. Her enemies will besiege her, and the outcome will be the release of the peoples that she has tyrannized. The two great powers who have ripped Israel and Judah apart, Assyria and Judah, will both pass away, and Babylon will end up in the same state as Assyria, whom Nebuchadnezzar so decisively removed from power at Carchemish.

Jer.50. 19- 20 The wonderful news for Judah and Israel which Seraiah will bring is that the Lord intends to restore them home to their land, settling again the territory promised to Abraham, but with a clean slate, their national guilt forgiven as the survivors return home.

Jer. 50. 21-30 The Lord issues a call for the nations to rise up against Babylon and her power, and pay her back for her arrogant suppression of the region. The Lord is making clear here that He is the ruler not just of Judah, but of the outcomes of human history,

interweaving His purposes and desires into the affairs of the peoples of the earth. More and more, we are seeing the Lord interfacing with people beyond the borders of the chosen people.

Jer. 50. 31 – 34 There is clearly a timetable in place for the demise of Babylon's power. The Lord speaks of punishing Babylon's arrogance as though it were a present reality. For the Lord, His Word is a creative force, putting down the markers of history, to which the flow of the story is inevitably drawn. Even though the prophetic words of Jeremiah will take seventy years to come about, in the mind of the Lord, the day has already arrived.

Jer. 50. 33 – 34 This brings hope for Judah when her present situation is captivity. The Word of the Lord is established, there will come a day when, just as in Egypt after so many centuries, the people of God are free to leave.

Jeremiah echoes the words of Isaiah in v.34 by referring to the Lord as the Redeemer (Heb גֹּ'עַל *Go'el*), the near kinsman who will remove, Boaz-like (see Ruth 4) the shame and fruitlessness of Israel by restoring their heritage and their name. And like Boaz, the Lord will not rest until He has fulfilled His purpose (cf. Ruth 3.18) to bring Israel 'to settlement' (Heb root word רָגַע *raga'*, to bring to peace, to settle a matter.) and Babylon to justice.

Jer. 50.35 – 40 Babylon is under notice of her downfall from the Lord, for her pursuit of idols. Babylon today is a ruin, with nothing left of the great gardens which were once the wonder of the world. God's Word is sure.

Day 226

The Outcome for Babylon is Inevitable

Jeremiah 50.41 – 51.64a; 49.34- 39; 34.8 – 22

Jer. 50.41 – 46 Jeremiah's words foretelling the collapse of Babylon must have sounded comical in the ears of his contemporaries, given that Babylon was about to maraud into Judah and destroy the Temple and city with it. How could he say that Babylon was going to fall? But the Lord's prophet needs it to be known that man's empires, however powerful they appear, are finite and bounded by the Lord's intentions and purposes. Babylon, ultimately, like all human empires, will become complacent and weak, and will be the prey of the northern nations.

51. 1 – 10 The fall of Babylon will be the sign that the Lord is restoring Israel and Judah to the land, as the crumbling empire is consigned to history. Perhaps it would have been possible to 'heal Babylon' – certainly, the presence of Judah and men such as Daniel in her midst brings sign of the Lord's mercy to her rulers – but her sin is so great, it is beyond healing. Her downfall will be the vindication of Israel. (v.10)

51.11-14 Here the Medes are identified as the ones who will bring down Babylon.

51. 15- 19 Jeremiah speaks of the awesome power of the One true Creator God, reflected in the tumult of the elements, and sets this in contrast with the deception and inanity of idolatry. The Lord cannot be compared to the idols of the pagans.

51.20-23 It is unclear to whom these words are directed – possibly to the coming Medes who will overpower Babylon. Whoever the addressee, the words speak of the freedom of God to direct the course of humanity, even in conflict and destruction, to further the story of His ultimate rescue of all things through Israel’s chosen One, the Messiah.

51.24 – 33 Linked with the foregoing verses, it seems to be clear that the reference is to the northern nations who are coming to defeat Babylon, whose judgement is linked to her ill-treatment of the nation of Israel.

51. 34 – 58 There is a call for retribution upon Nebuchadnezzar for his cruelty, to which the Lord responds with a promise that Babylon will fall and be turned into a ruin. At this point, the people of Israel are to escape and return to the land of promise. Jeremiah encourages the exiles to ‘remember the Lord in a distant land and think on Jerusalem.’ (51.50)

51.60 – 64a Jeremiah has the words he has spoken written down and committed to the officer, Seraiah, for reading to the exiles in Babylon, for their encouragement. At the end of its reading, a declaration of the coming destruction is to come, and the scroll is to be thrown into the Euphrates River as a witness against Babylon of the Lord’s intention (and perhaps also to remove potentially incriminating anti-Babylonian documentation from their midst.)

Jer.49.34- 39 **Word against Elam** Although Elam has not traditionally been an ally of Babylon, in fact has been an enemy, it seems that they have been part of the Babylonian Empire, and have provided support; the Lord is including them in the judgement against Babylon, although their nation will survive, where Babylon will fall.

Jer. 34.8 – 22 **The Shame of Enslaving Fellow Hebrews**

It is not clear what circumstances provoked King Zedekiah of Judah’s emancipation of Hebrew slaves, but he commands the release of fellow Jews held in indentured labour for the repayment of debts. Although there is general acceptance, when the moment comes for the slaves to go home, people’s greed and avarice takes over, and they renege on the deal, keeping hold of their countrymen as unpaid labour.

Jeremiah reminds Judah of the Law of Moses that fellow Jews are not to be held as slaves for more than seven years; the Lord was pleased with the moves to free those enslaved, and with the covenant made to underpin the move. But now He is provoked to anger by their refusal to keep their word.

There is an important indication in the words of Jeremiah about the practice of covenant-making in Israel, just in a passing mention of the ‘calf they cut in two and walked between its pieces.’ (34.19) Recalling Abraham’s covenant with God in Genesis 15, it can be seen from this that the practice of splitting sacrificed animals in two and passing between the pieces while declaring the covenant oath formula ‘*May the Lord do so to me,*

and more, if I do not keep the words of this covenant', (i.e., may I be split in two if I fail in this commitment.) was a key part of covenant bonds.

Thus the Lord is fully justified in His intention to do to Israel what they have called on God to do, for the failure of their covenanted word; they have not *done chesed*, they have not kept the obligation of the covenant, which is abhorrent to the God who cannot break His own covenanted promise, the God who is 'rich in *chesed*.'

The outcome will be that King Zedekiah will himself be enslaved by the Babylonians, who have at the moment withdrawn from threatening Jerusalem. Their return will result in the destruction of the territory and its cities.

Day 227

Enter Ezekiel, Exiled Prophet

Ezekiel 1.1 – 7.27

1.1 – 3 Ezekiel (Heb. יְחֶזְקֵאל *Yechezke'l*, meaning, 'the Lord will strengthen') is one of those deported with King Jehoiachin of Judah in 597BC by the Babylonians. He ends up in Chaldea, on the banks of the Kebhar river, a tributary of the Euphrates, in a place called Tel Aviv (Heb. תֵּל־אָבִיב) meaning, Hill of Spring. (Ez. 3.15) – the name today given to the major modern city in Israel on the Mediterranean coast.

Ezekiel Ben Buzi is of a priestly family, a Levite, which is perhaps reflected in his later visions of the Temple, its significance and its coming renewal. The prophetic book opens with Ezekiel's mystical visions of the greatness and gravity of God, His glory, in spectacular yet surreal colour and detail. Even then, Ezekiel is aware that he is unable to fully capture the full wonder of what he is seeing. (1.28)

1.4 – 28 Ezekiel's descriptive ability seems to almost fail him as he paints for his hearers the awesome account of the vision of God which he is given. The Lord is in a windstorm, a great hurricane of power – compare this with the rushing wind heard at Pentecost (Acts. 2.1), a sign of God's presence.

There is also fire, another elemental force, at the heart of the vision. But then, *living creatures* (Heb. חַיִּיִּם *chayot*, from the root meaning life, to live) are seen, human in form, but with four faces and wings, and calves' feet. These are later identified in chapter 10.2 as the mighty *kherubhim*, guardians of Eden. They move straight ahead, without rotating. Each one has the face of a lion, a man, an ox and an eagle. Christian iconography has linked this picture to the four gospel writers, and is a popular representation of them. They move under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, with flashes of fire between them. There seems to be something in the faces of the nature and characteristics depicted by these creatures which is key.

Each of them is also linked to the motion of a wheel, which intersect each other. This is where the vision becomes difficult to imagine; but what is key here is the sense of *mobility*, the fact that God is not fixed or static. The wheels turn, the creatures move, the

Spirit leads. It is a wonderfully dynamic picture of the Lord, and for a people far from their homeland and their national shrine of the Temple, it is an encouragement that the Lord is not tied to that place, but, as with Israel in the wilderness, He is on the move, and able to reach them.

Above the creatures is an awesome expanse of sparkling crystal, and the sound of rushing waters, which is the voice of the Lord. Above this is the sapphire throne, upon which Ezekiel beholds the image of the Lord, fiery, shining, surrounded in light and rainbows. 'This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord' – Ezekiel cannot fully describe what he sees, so powerful is it.

And it is this God, this mobile, dynamic glory, who is coming to them in their place of exile, not bound to a place or a building, and who changes their perspective from inward to outward-looking.

2. 1- 10 Ezekiel is warned that he is called to a hard-hearted and stubborn people, but the Lord is going to make him unshakable in his resolve to speak. Even if though don't listen, they will know that a prophet of the Lord has been with them.

2.11 – 3.21 He is shown a scroll and told to eat it, although it contains bitter words of mourning. The scroll when eaten is sweet in his mouth, bespeaking the sweetness of God's word to His people. Then the Holy Spirit lifts him up and takes him away to Tel Aviv, to begin his ministry to the people. He is told that if he does not speak, he will be responsible for those who perish, while if he delivers the Lord's warnings, and they go unheeded, the responsibility will be theirs alone.

3.22 – 5.17 **Five Signs of Ezekiel**

The Lord speaks to Ezekiel out of the great moving glory which he has shown him in chapter 1, the awe of which causes Ezekiel to fall down to the ground. But then the Spirit raises him up, and he is instructed to fulfil five prophetic tasks as signs to the people.

- 1) First, (3.22-23) Ezekiel shuts himself inside his house, as a sign that he will be restricted by his countrymen, and bound and gagged.
- 2) Second, (3.24 - 4.3) Ezekiel is to draw an image of Jerusalem on a clay brick, and make a model of siege works around it, with an iron pan set against it, as a sign of the determination Nebuchadnezzar will show in bringing down the city.
- 3) Third, (4.4 - 8) Ezekiel is to lie on his left side for a year, then on his right for a further time, as a sign of the terrible restriction Jerusalem will undergo for her sin. Then, as he faces the model of the siege, he is to prophesy against Jerusalem.
- 4) Fourth, (4.9 – 17) during the time Ezekiel is lying on his side, he is to make bread over a fire of human excrement. This unpleasant sign will speak of the defilement of Israel as she has to eat unclean, non-kosher food among the nations where she is banished.

Ezekiel protests at this point, and objects that he has never eaten anything unclean – the Lord is being unreasonable. There is an amazing sign here of the relationship between Ezekiel and the Lord, that the prophet can negotiate the severity of the

Lord's demonstration through him. Because of this request, the Lord changes his requirement to a fire made with cow dung, which does not involve uncleanness.

5) Fifthly, (5.1-17) Ezekiel is to have his hair shaved off, divide it in three, and scatter, burn and hide it as a sign of three things the people of Israel will suffer as they are brought to judgement.

The Lord is going to allow his people to endure great shame because of their rebellion against him, so that they see how foolish it is to dishonour the Lord.

Ez. 6.1 – 14 For centuries, since the coming of Israel into the promised land, the issue of the high places, the hilltop places of worship have been an issue. Even though the kings may have removed the Ba'alim and the Asherah poles, and cleansed the land, they tended to leave these centres of folk worship to continue. Now, Ezekiel has a word against the high places on the hills and mountains, where uncommanded and unauthorized worship has been going on. They will be destroyed and their practitioners removed. The picture of dead bodies lying among these broken altars and under the groves of trees where these cults have continued is a terrible one.

Ez. 7.1 – 9 Ezekiel is told to prophecy 'the end' (Heb *חֵץ*, *ha-qetz*) upon the land, like the curtain falling on a grim stageplay. There is no way out, and the blow will be fatal, as the Lord brings retribution for Israel's faithlessness. The outcome of this part of the story is an evil one (v.5)

Ez. 7.10 – 27 The wealth and military ability of Judah will be of no use to her in this coming deluge of judgement; the silver and gold will be worthless in the crisis. The precious metals and jewels, used to make cultic idols, will be of no protection, and will be taken from them. The outcome of this devastation, however, will be a realization of the fact that God is He who says He is, and stands by His word, for good or ill.

Day 228

God's Glory Departs from Jerusalem

Ezekiel 8.1 – 11.25

Ez. 8.1 – 4 This word is dated to around 591 BC - five years before the destruction of the Temple. Ezekiel is apprehended by a flaming figure, who reaches out what seems to be a fiery hand and lifts him up by the hair, and carries him back to Jerusalem in his vision. He comes to the place in the Temple where an idol has been set up and he sees also the vision of God's glory, with the faces and the wheels, and the crystal expanse, which he saw earlier.

8. 5 – 18 The Lord calls Ezekiel to witness the degrading idolatry which is going on in the very Temple itself. He is brought to the northern gate, where Manasseh had set up an Asherah pole, provoking the Lord's jealousy, since this was His place of worship. But worse things were going on.

Hidden in a room in the store rooms around the Temple courts are seventy elders of Israel, involved in the burning of incense to images of creatures scrawled on the walls. J. Muilenburg in Peake's Commentary suggests that these may indicate the import into Judah of Egyptian idols which are being incorporated in this false worship. But more is to come.

Back at the north gate, Ezekiel is shown a group of women mourning at the image of Tammuz. The cult of Tammuz was practiced in Sumeria, a pseudo-deity comparable to Ba'al in the Canaanite fertility religion's cyclical story of his death in the autumn, when everything dies back for the winter, and his return to life in spring with the new foliage appearing. Therefore, these women are involved in the ritual bemoaning of the apparent departure of Tammuz.

Then Ezekiel sees a group of twenty-five men, with their backs to the Holy Place, facing the sunrise, worshipping the sun. Apparently, according to G. Beasley-Murray in the New Bible Commentary, sun-worship had been practised by the Canaanites, but then reintroduced to Israel through Assyrian influences. The worship of the sun is proscribed by Josiah in his reforms in 2 Kings 23.5, and is also mentioned as a factor by Jeremiah in Jer.8.2.

The 'putting the branch to the nose' reference is quite obscure, but some cults' practices involve certain plants being used, and this may be part of that procedure.

All in all, the Temple of the Lord is being desecrated and used as an idol shrine, and payback time is coming for the idolaters.

Ez. 9.1-11 Ezekiel in his vision of the Temple now sees the Temple guard coming, armed with swords, and accompanied by a scribe dressed in linen. They take up a position next to the altar of sacrifice in the court of the Temple.

The glory of the Lord now moves from over the ark of the covenant, with its cherubim, where He had rested, in the Holy of Holies, and moves to the entrance of the Holy Place. The scribe is now called to go and mark those citizens who are appalled at the false worship going on in the Temple. The guards are then to follow, putting to the sword all those who are not marked as the Lord's people, starting with the elders in their sin.

Ezekiel protests at one point at the slaughter going on (9.8), but the Lord replies that the defilement of the land is so terrible, only this purging will do. The scribe returns, having completed his task.

10.1-22 The scribe is now instructed to go into the glory of God, and to take burning coals from there (cf. Isa.6.6) and scatter them through the city. This instruction is obeyed, and the man goes out into the city with a handful of coals.

Now, the *kerubhim* (cherubim), are fully identified with the living creatures under the throne of God of Ezekiel's first vision in chapter 1. We are taken back again to the description of the awesome sight of this chariot of God as it moves through the Temple, and takes up position, like some great airliner readying for take-off, at the southern side of the Temple Courts. It then moves back over the place of the Holy of

Holies, and it seems that the *kerubhim* (cherubim) on the ark of the covenant are joined to them, leaving the holy of holies. Suddenly, the whole vision rises up, leaving the sanctuary, and moves to the eastern gate of the Temple, to where the twenty-five sun-worshipping men are bowing down.

11.1-13 Ezekiel is called to prophesy to these twenty-five men, some of them leaders of the people. They seem to be seeing an opportunity to profit from the present situation, ready to build properties and make the most of the turmoil. But the Lord's word is that they will be the ones who will suffer loss, because of their refusal to follow the ways of the Lord. In the midst of this judgement, one of the men, Pelatiah Ben Benaiah, dies, and Ezekiel cries out to the Lord for mercy on the nation which is under such heavy judgement.

11. 14 – 21 But the Lord promises that those who are now in exile with Ezekiel will be the ones to return and re-establish the nation after this terrible time. In their returning, they will purge the Temple of the idolatrous worship, and will receive a new heart of flesh, a soft heart, which fully acknowledges the Lord and follows Him.

11.22-25 Now the vision of the Lord's glory which Ezekiel has so closely described departs from the Temple altogether and moves to the hills east of Jerusalem. At the same time, Ezekiel is returned to his fellow-exiles in Babylonia (Chaldea) , where he shares with them the weighty things he has seen.

Day 229

Acting Out God's Word

Ezekiel 12.1 – 14.23

Ez. 12.1-16 In a powerful dramatization of the Lord's word, Ezekiel packs his belongings and digs a hole through the wall to escape, as a taste of the uprooting of the people of Judah left at home which is to come. This is to be particularly a word to those who are unbelieving, a vivid, visual statement of the Lord's intention for the King and his people. In particular, it is prophesied here that King Zedekiah will be taken to Babylonia, but he will not see it, and there he will die. This is because Zedekiah's eyes will be put out before he is deported (2 Kings 25.7) and so even though he comes to Babylon, it will be invisible to him.

Ez. 12. 17 – 20 In a second enactment of the Lord's Word, Ezekiel shakes violently as he eats his meals, and is visibly afraid as he drinks, as a sign of the fear and trembling which are coming to the rest of Judah at home, which will be laid waste by the incoming invaders.

12. 21 – 28 Ezekiel has a word for those doubters who are saying that the words of prophecy are empty, or for a long time in the future. The Lord wants to assure them that their doubts are misplaced; the Lord will bring these things about, and without delay. Around five years later, the fulfilment arrives.

13.1 – 16 One of the reasons why people are rejecting prophetic words is because there are so many prophets who are telling lies. Ezekiel is called to speak out against

these false prophets, who instead of calling Israel to her heritage and to repentance, are telling them all will be well, that there will be peace, when there is no peace. For this, they will be rejected and unremembered.

13.17-23 Ezekiel is given a word not only for the men who are prophesying but the women too. These dress up in spooky attire to make themselves look impressive, and get people to 'cross their palms' with payment. They are discouraging the righteous in the land, and encouraging the wicked in their wickedness. The Lord will deliver His people from their machinations and tricks.

14. 1 – 11 **The visit of the Elders to Ezekiel.** Some of the leaders of Israel in exile come and visit Ezekiel; however, Ezekiel discerns the evil in their hearts, the idolatry which they are pursuing. They may be coming to seek Ezekiel's guidance, but the only word the prophet has for them is 'repent!' – turn away from these worthless images and disgusting practices. As far as the false prophets are concerned, who are misleading the people into these cultic ways, the Lord is intent on removing them, and making the people His own, unhindered by these babblers of lies.

14. 12 – 23 **Even if...** There is a very deep and serious truth in this passage of conversation between the Lord and Ezekiel, which reflects how the Lord holds each person individually accountably for their sin and wellbeing. As Abraham found, back in Genesis 18, the presence of righteous people in a society does not make the society righteous. Even if Noah, Daniel and Job were present in Judah at the moment, they could not change the outcome for the nation as a whole. They would only be able to receive their own salvation and rescue. In fact, it would be over six hundred years until one would come who was able to rescue the whole world by His righteousness, God Himself incarnate, Jesus Christ. But still, each one must respond for themselves, not for others.

The Lord tells the exiles that when the survivors of the coming tempest make it to Babylon, and they hear of the terrible violence, hunger and disease which they have been through, they will actually understand that there is a reason for it all.

Day 230

A Useless Vine, An Unworthy Wife

Ezekiel 15. 1 – 18.32

Ez. 15. 1- 8 The picture of Israel as a vine looks back to the words of Hosea in Hos.10 and of Isaiah in his fifth chapter. The nation has become good for nothing but destruction, like the branches of the vine which cannot be used for any other purpose than as fuel for burning. The Lord's retribution is coming upon them for their unfaithfulness.

Jesus also, in His teaching, reminds His disciples that as branches of the vine, they must abide in Him, to bear the Father-pleasing fruit, the barren stock being cut off and burned, as Ezekiel describes here. (John 15)

Ez. 16. 1 – 14 The Lord gives Ezekiel a lengthy parable, likening Judah to a rejected daughter, left as a baby to die, until the compassion of the Lord is directed towards her, and He rescues her. Then when she is grown, her redeemer sees her beauty and takes her for His wife, covering her with his garment along the lines of Ruth's appeal to Boaz in Ruth 3.9. She becomes a beautiful bride, covenanted to her rescuer.

Ez. 16. 15 – 22. But, echoing the terrible experience of the prophet Hosea, the beautiful wife sells her beauty in prostitution. Israel has carried on with the idols and in the high places which lead her into adultery against the Lord. Worse still, Judah has sacrificed her children to the abominable no-gods, and forgotten the rescuer who found her in her need.

Ez. 16.23 – 63 Ezekiel speaks woe to Israel for her religious prostitution with the nations around her and their idols. Because of her misconduct, the Lord is going to shame her before the world, and she will suffer the punishment of an adulteress. In following the ways of the pagan predecessors in the land, whom the Lord calls Israel's father and mother, with Samaria in Israel cast as her elder sister, Judah has betrayed the Lord, her husband, guilty of worse sin than the northern Kingdom ever committed.

There is some hope of restoration, and a promise of the old covenant being replaced by a new covenant, with the Lord Himself making atonement for the sins of His wayward spouse.

Ez.17. 1 – 18 A further parable is shown to Ezekiel, concerning the Kings of Judah and their fate. First, Jehoiachin, pictured as the branch of a Cedar tree, is torn off by the Babylonian eagle, and carried off to exile in Babylon. In his place, Zedekiah is established as King instead, (some of the seed of the land), and begins to flourish, it seems, under the dominion of the Empire. Yet another great eagle is on the scene, another power in the region, this time representing Egypt, to whom the vine (Judah) turns for help.

Because of this rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, Ezekiel declares the uprooting also of Zedekiah and his deportation to Babylon. He will not succeed and prosper; doomsday is approaching for the monarchy.

At the last point in the chapter, there is a promise that the Lord will Himself establish a King who will become fruitful, and will gain renown in the nations. There is a hope, then, that the Lord will restore the nation and still is pursuing His original purpose to bless all the nations through Israel. It is just going to take a lot more work.

Ez.18. 1 – 32 Echoing the earlier words in 14. 12 – 23, Ezekiel emphasizes the role of personal responsibility in the relationship with the Lord. There is a proverb that states that the sins of the fathers are imputed to the children, who also suffer. But Ezekiel declares that this will not be the case – each one is judged for their own sin, and for no one else's.

If a righteous man lives a righteous life, he can expect a full life. If that man has a son who goes off the rails and lives in evil, he will not be able to appeal to the credit of his father's goodness and right actions. He will be removed.

Yet again, if that evil man's son lives in wholesome goodness before the Lord, even his father was wicked, his son will be accepted, because the guilt for sin is carried by the sinner, not his descendants.

Lastly, Ezekiel points out that there is the possibility of turning away from an evil course and coming back to the way of the Lord, because the Lord does not want the death of sinners, but their life. God is delighted when the wicked repent and turn to Him. Some might criticize the Lord for injustice in this, for forgiveness which is offered so freely, but the Lord protests that it is not He who is unjust, but Israel, in her desire for vengeance. Ezekiel issues a call for repentance, because the Lord doesn't want the destruction of anyone.

How does this expression of God's forgiveness tie in with His declared nature in Ex 34. 6 as being a God who does not acquit the guilty, but causes the effects of sin to last for three or four generations?

The key is in the fact that what God offers is forgiveness, not an overlooking of evil. God does not brush sin under the carpet and say it doesn't matter; He looks for repentance, acknowledgement of the failure, and action to reverse the rot. He then steps in to forgive and draw the poison of sin out of the system.

Further, God does not arbitrarily impose some vindictive curse on the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren of those who live evil lives, but permits the effect of their sin to run its course without mitigation, without softening its sting. The third and fourth generation, after all, is grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and conceivably, the evil actions of a grandfather will impinge even on the lives of his grandchildren, if he does not turn from his sinful ways.