

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
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The Darkness of a Departed Glory

Ezekiel 8:1 – 9:11; 10:18

The story of David and Solomon not only remind us how easy it is for the godly to fall, but how dangerously close we are to doing the same. After innocence was lost in the garden after the first sin of our great ancestors Adam and Eve... our problem is the problem of cain: "...**sin is crouching at the door, and its desire is for you**" (Gen. 4:7). However, over and over again, regardless of the magnitude of the sin, God's grace has proven far superior!

After Adam and Eve's sin of wanting to be just like God and their expulsion from the Garden and subjugation to death... God promise a savior who would destroy the devil. When the earth was filled with violence and God had every right to drown every single human being that walked this planet, He spared Noah and his family to begin again for the purpose of preserving His promise to the first couple. God's grace is so much bigger than our sin.

God's grace was bigger than Abraham's idolatry, deceit, and failures as a husband; in the midst of all of his sin, God unconditionally and repeatedly promised to bless the nations through his descendants. God's grace was bigger than the sins of Lot's two daughters when he preserved His messianic promise through their scheming by getting their father drunk and then raping him for the purpose of getting pregnant by him.

God's grace overcame the victimization of Leah by her father Laban after he fooled Jacob into marrying her, and God's love overcame lack of love she received from her husband by blessing her with Judah as the messianic seed. God's grace was bigger than Judah's hatred of his daughter-in-law... Tamar, and it overcame her sin after she prostituted herself to Judah so that she could become pregnant.

God's grace was big enough to overwhelm Rahab's whoring around Jericho and pervasive enough to rescue her from a judgment she deserved so that her son Boaz would be born. After Naomi lost everything, it was because of His grace that God moved heaven and earth to provide her with a Kinsmen redeemer and preserve the messianic line through Boaz, and her widowed daughter-in-law... Ruth. Little did Naomi know that God not only rescued her from the loss of everything, but through Boaz and Ruth, God was working to restore what was lost in the Garden through Adam and Eve's rebellion.

Boaz and Ruth had a child together by the name of Obed who was the grandfather of David. Through David, much of the Psalms were written, Israel experienced victory over her enemies, and every king after David is measured and judged in light of his love for God and greatness as a king. However, David will always be remembered for his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the premeditated murder of her husband Uriah to cover up the unavoidable evidence of David's

sin growing within Bathsheba's womb. God's grace proved too great for even David to escape, for even though he did not go unpunished, God put away his sin due to David's sorrow and repentance and through the woman he sinned with and against. God brought from her womb Solomon and Nathan. Solomon would become the great ancestor of Joseph, and it is believed that Nathan became the great ancestor of Mary the mother of Jesus.

There is no sin too great, nor heart so far removed from God, that is beyond the reach of a God whose grace overwhelms and transforms. However, we continue to live under a curse that we all long to be delivered from. We long for the day when disease, injustice, violence, and death will be no more. We long for a day when every tear will be wiped away our eyes and weeping will be no more.

God's "Goodbye"

The reign of Solomon left an open door for rampant idolatry, gross immorality, and systemic injustice throughout the land. After his death, Solomon's kingdom was divided into a northern and a southern kingdom where the sin of idolatry, immorality, and injustice spread like gangrene from the North and spread down to the South to the point when God's patience was exhausted and His judgment the North and eventually the south would become imminent. God warned the Hebrew people that if they turned from Him to other gods, He would expel them from the land promised to their forefathers and have them carried out by a foreign nation in exile. The Northern Kingdom was first to be exiled through the Assyrian Empire, and the Babylonian Empire would eventually carry out the Southern Kingdom.

As long as God was with His people, there was hope of a return to the land as previous generations in Israel experienced. Things did not seem that they could have gotten any worse when the Babylonian Empire overpowered the Southern kingdom and forced many of the people into exile, leaving Judah without a king. However, it did get worse, as we learn from the prophet Ezekiel, who, at the time of his writing, also found himself in Babylon as an exile.

Ezekiel was in his house in Babylon sitting with the leaders of Judah when he was suddenly transported in a dream to the Temple. The very first thing that Ezekiel saw was the glory of God in the appearance of a man; usually when God is seen in the appearance of a human being, it is the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. I believe Ezekiel sees the glory of God in the person of His Son Jesus just like Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6 (see John's explanation of what the prophet saw in John 12:36b-43).

We know from Isaiah 6, that the One Ezekiel saw is the one to whom the angels sing, "**Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!**" This same God demands from His people: "**You shall be holy, for I am holy**" (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). It is in contrast to the glory and majesty of God that everything else he was about to see will be compared.

Vision 1: The Image of Jealousy (8:3-6)

We are not told what this image looked like, but we do know that it was an idol set up in proximity of the alter where offerings were to be made to Yahweh. The act of putting the idol in the temple was outrageous and an act of sheer indifference to God and His Word. The idol was

put there, most likely by the priests of the Temple, where it was not only tolerated by the people, but worshiped.

Ezekiel called what he saw an “image of jealousy” because of what the people’s idolatry incited in Yahweh. God is jealous for His glory because He alone is God and there is none like Him. Everything that exists, exists for Him; the people were worshiping something they created rather than the creator. Later on in his book, Ezekiel was told to tell the people why they were now in exile:

But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore. And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. Also my bread that I gave you--I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey--you set before them for a pleasing aroma; and so it was, declares the Lord GOD. (Ezek. 16:15-19)

God saw His people’s idolatry as a whoring around. They took the good gifts God had given them and devoted them to the worship of other gods. Remember that Idols of the heart are those things we make ultimate, then we sacrifice the good things God has given us to that idol whether it be a sports, a child, our family, work, health, friendships, ideologies, sex, a bank account, etc. Listen, whether it is an image you bow down to or an image you set up in your heart, God will not share His glory with another. The next vision the prophet saw was of the 70 elders of Israel.

Vision 2: The Image of the 70 Elders (8:7-13)

The next vision the Ezekiel saw was of the leaders of Judah doing in secret thinking that God did not see them. God saw it and called their actions abominable. When God showed the prophet what these leaders were doing in secret, he called their deeds “**vile abominations**,” because they were worshiping, “**every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel.**” Verse 12 informs us that these leaders were worshiping in the dark because they thought that God could not see what they were doing in secret.

The reality is that God not only sees the secret things of the heart, but also the things we do in the dark (1 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 17:10). Of the 70 elders, God named one of them by name:

Jaazaniah. Jaazaniah’s clan participated in the reforms King Josiah brought (2 Kings 22:8-10); Jaazaniah’s name is mentioned to show that in one generation, the hearts of Judah turned from Yahweh. If it could happen with Jaazaniah, it can happen to you. I can’t describe how much it scares me that my sins can bring great harm not only upon me, but upon my family as well.

Vision 3: The Image of the Weeping Women (8:14-15)

In his third vision, Ezekiel saw a weeping women. What do weeping women have to do with what is going on in the Temple? Like the first two visions, it is a picture of the pervasive idolatry that filled Judah’s worship. The women were weeping not for some guy named Tammuz, but a false god. Tammuz was believed to bring fertility to the land and the wombs of women who worshiped him. It was believed that every fall, Tammuz would die; maybe this is

why the women were weeping, for this was part of their worship of the god. The way his worshipers would bring him back to life by holding festivals with all kinds of sexual practices; these women were most likely the sacred prostitutes that served Tammuz. These women also served in Yahweh's temple.

Not only was Tammuz a Babylonian god worshiped in Yahweh's temple by his devotees, but unlike the 70 elders their sin is not practiced in the dark but in the open. Sin may be something done in the secret places at first, but it is only a matter of time before it is something that is overt, leading to full blown abandonment of God.

Vision 4: The Image of the 25 Men (8:16-17)

The final vision the prophet has is of 25 men with their backs to the temple bowing to the Sun in worship of it. The place they are bowing is the place reserved for the priests. Their backs are to the temple in defiance as if to say that Yahweh either does not exist or that He is insignificant. Instead they spend their energies worshiping what He has created.

This final vision is a portrait of total apostasy, and it is seen in every corner of the Temple where it should have been absent: the Temple. The people God called out of Egypt to be His treasured possession, kingdom of priests, and holy nation, "*exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator*" (Rom. 1:25). Judah's idolatry was as bad as it could have possibly been; in Ezekiel 10, the prophet witnesses the glory of God leaving the Temple. God's presence left the Temple because He is holy and the Temple became a place of pervasive wickedness. About six months after Ezekiel's vision, the Temple was completely destroyed.

Application

The glory of God departed the temple and shortly after, Solomon's temple was destroyed. When God's glory left the Temple, it was essentially His "goodbye" to a people who had exhausted His patience. What we learn from every individual in Jesus' family tree is that we need someone perfect and without sin to stand on our behalf and in our place as our representative. Israel, as a people, proved over and over again, that love for and obedience to God was impossible.

The problem of every member in Jesus' family tree is our problem: we have a heart problem. Will power and an attempted obedience to the commandments of God are not enough. The commandments of God simply highlight for us that we do not need simply the presence of God in a Temple made with hands, but we need the presence of God to melt our hard hearts into tender hearts that can beat for Him in love and obedience. We need one like us who can stand as our "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince Peace" (Isa. 9:6); we need that same Person to "bear our grief and carry our sorrows." We need the Prince of Peace to be our Suffering Servant who could willingly be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and take upon Himself the iniquities of us all" (Isa. 53:4-6). We need the promised Seed and the Glory of God wrapped up in one person. We need a Savior; we need Jesus the Christ.

The reason the glory of God departed is because His glory would return one day in Bethlehem through a person born to Mary. On the first Christmas, the glory that left the temple, returned to Israel and could be first seen in a manger and heard through the echo of Newborn's cry.

There are so many applications that can be gleaned from this passage in Ezekiel, but I will only share five with you and hope you will look for others:

1. God demands holiness.

Jesus said, "*Without holiness, no one will see God*" (Heb. 12:14). God is holy and He demands holiness from all of His creation, especially from His people. Sin is serious and has no place in the presence of God. God hates sin and will one day deal with it once and for all in a day reserved for His complete and total wrath where the dead and the living will stand before His throne to be judged (see Rev. 20)

2. God's people are not exempt from His judgment.

If the exiles of Israel and Judah have taught you anything, I hope they have taught you that (1) God will do what He must to encourage His people to repent of their sins, and (2) He will discipline His people to promote holiness in their lives. Consider 1 Peter 4:16-18, "*Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And 'If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'*"

3. See sin as God sees it.

When is the last time you wept over your sin and/or the sins of another? To see sin as God sees it is to be abhorred by it and to mourn because of it. As one pastor once said, "If we do not hate sin we have nothing in common with God." In one of his sermons on Romans 8:13, John Owen said, "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you." Remember well Jesus' words:

Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. (Matt. 18:7-9)

4. Rejoice that Jesus died in your place.

Jesus died not only so that we might be spared from the wrath of God because of our sin, but He died to make us holy. When you see the crucified Christ, you see the ugliness of our sin where the wrath of God and the Love of God kiss on our behalf. God hates sin so much that He killed His son in our place because Jesus took on our sin in our place, or as the Apostle Paul stated: "*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21).