



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

## MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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Volume 17 Issue 6

February 11, 2018

### A Pilgrim Mind, Part 4

*“After my son died, I stopped caring about God.”* That was the response I received from a lady when I asked her the question, “If she died, did she think she would go to heaven?”

It truly is tragic to me to think of the many people who used to attend a church, read their Bibles, go to Sunday school, but because of a tragedy or trial, have withdrawn wanting nothing to do with God. While the vast majority of these most likely are not saved, how many are genuine servants of the Lord — children of God sidelined because they have misunderstood the nature of the pilgrim life in Christ? That — as we have seen — is the concern of the passage at which we are looking today!

Ezekiel 38-39 was written to the newly arriving Judean exiles in Babylon. It was designed to help them process the tragedy they currently were living through. We are looking at the meat of God's answer to the question of "Why? Why the bitter providence? Why had God seemingly forsaken His people?"

As we proceed, it is imperative that we keep in mind the preface to the answer God is about to provide which was given to frame the thinking of His people (Ezekiel 38-39:20) — seven truths in all.

1. Gog and Magog- the present age in which we live which is hostile to God- are in God's Sovereign Control, Ezekiel 38:1-8.
2. Gog and Magog are Culpable before God for its Sin, Ezekiel 38:10-13.
3. The Passion of Gog is to Oppose God's People, Ezekiel 38:14-16- which means this world is NOT a friend of grace and so God's people in Babylon ought not to get too cozy with the nation!
4. When the Culmination of the Desires of Gog and Magog are Brought to a Climatic Point in Time, God will Bring about Severe Judgment upon this Earth, Ezekiel 38:17-22.
5. God will Make the Passion of the World- which is to attack and so destroy God's people- its Undoing, Ezekiel 39:1-8.
6. The Net-Result of all Worldly Opposition against God's People will be for the Benefit of God's People, Ezekiel 39:9-10.
7. The End of this World Involves a Curse, Grief and Woe that Defies Imagination, Ezekiel 39:11-20!

With these truths guarding our mind from going places it ought not to go, notice with me the climax and so the teaching that God wanted His people to walk away with when it came to the "Whys?" and "Wherefores?" of the exile. It all revolved around two concepts which Ezekiel returns to three times in this periscope:

1. Vindication- on the part of God when it comes to the world in which we live (vv. 21, 23-24, 27-28), and...
2. Instruction- on the part of His people (vv. 22, 25-26, 29).

Consider with me the first set, starting with "The Vindication." Why the exile? It was ordained so that all may know that God is the sovereign Lord of creation.

Ezekiel 39:21, "And I shall set My glory among the nations; and all the nations will see My judgment which I have executed [this is talking about the exile], and My hand which I have laid on them."

From this we see that it was God's intention through the exile to "manifest His glory [that is, the weightiness of His being] [to] the nations"! How would the exile do this?

It wasn't rocket science, and in fact stands to reason. If the Lord is sovereign and ill comes to

a city, God obviously ordained it!

Amos 3:6b, "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?"

Lamentations 3:38, "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?"

Yet in the ancient world, it wasn't so black and white. For while everyone would have agreed that tragedy or disaster was appointed by a god (there were very few atheists in the ancient world), the question would have been, "Which god ordained it?" And that is the issue here! In the ancient world was dualistic. They believed that what occurred in the world of man was a reflection of what occurred in the heavenly realm among the gods.

When the Philistines captured the Ark (1 Samuel 4), they placed it before their chief god, Dagon (1 Samuel 5). Because in their thinking — which no doubt included the thinking of many amongst God's people after the loss of the ark — Yahweh and Dagon had engaged in a struggle for dominance in the heavenly realm and Dagon won. Therefore, the Philistines were able to capture the Ark!

Because of this prevailing worldview, what did God do? We read about it in the next chapter, 1 Samuel 5. Again, following the battle the priests of Dagon placed the Ark in a position of homage before the idol of Dagon! The next morning the priests of Dagon came to work and found Dagon on its face before the Ark! No doubt shocked, the priests set their idol upright and went on with their business. The following morning when they returned, Dagon once again was on its face before the Ark, but this time the statue's head and hands had been cut off and placed on the threshold (1 Samuel 5:4)! This was incredibly significant, for in military executions at this time the head and hands of the soldier would be severed and displayed as a declaration of one's dominance and sovereignty over the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, as the people looked upon the remains, the implication was clear:

1. Behold their Strength — that which wielded the sword (their hands)!
2. Behold their Cognition — that by which they planned for the demise of their enemy (their head)!
3. Both are no more; I have conquered!

This is the message God gave both the Philistines and His people regarding Dagon in 1 Samuel 5! The conclusion from all of this would NOT have been missed: What occurred in the Battle of Shiloh was NOT a reflection of God's inability, BUT His Sovereign control of all things!

This is God's point in Ezekiel, and so that which is behind every providence of the Lord! Why were God's people in exile? Why the difficulty and hardships of life? They are ordained by God to demonstrate to the world that God reigns! And so, the exile testifies NOT to the absence of God's care, BUT to the presence of God's Sovereign, unthwartable Purpose! And the nations got it upon the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC,

Jeremiah 40:2-3a, "Now the [Babylonian] captain of the bodyguard had taken Jeremiah [who at the time was in prison on account of his prophecies] and said to him, 'The Lord your God promised this calamity against this place; and the Lord has brought *it* on and done just as He promised...'"

In fact, it was this message God proclaimed in Babylon PRIOR to the final exile! Sometime before the exile of 586 BC, God singlehandedly vanquished the Babylonians such that the returning Babylonian army AND the exiles were greeted in Babylon with this proclamation from none other than Nebuchadnezzar himself! Speaking of Yahweh, Nebuchadnezzar issued this decree to his entire kingdom,<sup>2</sup>

Daniel 4:34b-35, "...[God's] dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom *endures* from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"

Tremper Longman put it this way:

This account of his dream and madness rips away the facade and shows the reality of who is in control- not Nebuchadnezzar, but God, who calls the shots... the overarching concern of the chapter [is] that God protects his faithful people in spite of the odds. The purpose of the story is to encourage their confidence in the light of their helplessness before a seemingly all-powerful human ruler. (III, 1999, pp. 122-123)

That is the first point God gives here by way of explanation concerning the Exile and so the Pilgrim status of His people! The exile demonstrated to the world that God is THE Sovereign who reigns on high- in the words of Ezekiel, "...all the nations will see My judgment which I have executed, and My hand which I have laid on them." (Ezekiel 39:21)!

So Christian, why the difficulty and trials of life? They are given by God so that the world may come to know that God reigns on High! You say, "How does the non-Christian world get this message from OUR trial and difficulty? Our cancer? The natural disasters under which righteous people suffer?"

Well, how did Nebuchadnezzar get the message?

Through the testimony of the Jewish children whom God ripped from their home in 605 BC, brought to Babylon, placed in Nebuchadnezzar's court, and then in His providence had their lives threatened on account of their godly refusal to worship the king of Babylon.

Daniel 3:16-18, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it

be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But *even if He does not*, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Consider the example of Job- when he lost everything, remember his response?

Job. 1:21b, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!”

How could a watching world NOT respond to this by asking about the hope that lay in this man (cf. 1 Peter 3:15)? Peter- speaking of his crucifixion, Christ said:

John 21:19: “Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God.”

David, who in the midst of a bitter providence in which his world had been turned upside down by Saul, rather than rebelling against God, shrinking back, and killing Saul, David did that which all must do when life becomes bitter.

Psalms 57:9-11, “I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to Thee among the nations. For Thy lovingkindness is great to the heavens, and Thy truth to the clouds. Be exalted above the heavens, O God; let Thy glory *be* above all the earth.”

All of this has as its aim the salvation of the lost! After the Lord delivered David, not necessarily from, but in his affliction, this is what David wrote:

Psalms 40:1-3, “I Waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay; and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear, and will trust in the Lord.”

The end of David’s suffering was the proclamation of the character of God that the world might be saved!

Luke 13:1-5, “Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’”

Christian, with every bitter providence, do NOT shrink back in anger! Knowing well the truths of

Ezekiel 38-39:20, proclaim the glory of God among the nations!<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, do you see the tragedy when Christians (ignorant of the fourth and seventh truth of Ezekiel 38-39:20) respond to bitter providence by shrinking back in their faith and so cease praying, praising, and serving the Lord? The bitter providence is given that the child of God might proclaim the greatness of God to the nations (who at this moment are under the wrath of God, Ezekiel 38:17-22; 39:11-20) that they might be saved!

The second stated purpose behind the exile is so that God's people might know that they are ever and always precious to the Lord.

Ezekiel 39:21b-22, "...all the nations will see My judgment which I have executed, and My hand which I have laid on them. AND the house of Israel will know that I am the Lord THEIR God from that day onward."

Verse 22 completes the thought begun in verse 21. Through the trials and tragedies of life, NOT ONLY does the non-Christian world behold the sovereignty and glory of God, BUT the child of God also receives a very important message! What is the message? It is that God loves THEM!

On the surface, this is addressing what I call The "Contradiction" of Discipline. It is natural to think that if a person is on the receiving end of discipline, then they are unloved. Today, Gog and Magog is shocked at the notion of corporeal punishment when it comes to children. They say, "*A child rebels because they feel unloved* [which is wrong for that is NOT why a child rebels; we'll leave this for another day] *and the Church's answer is to beat them?*" Yet in their blindness and ignorance, they have failed to understand a very important truth, "It is on account of discipline that we endure" (Hebrews 12:7a)!

The world in which we live involves a very important principle: Growth comes from affliction!

1. What happens if you help a butterfly out of its cocoon? It will be unable to fly!
2. It is the harsh winter that produces the sweetest fruit and the best flowers!
3. It is the bone that suffers micro-breaks that is the strongest!
4. We learn most when we make mistakes!

That is the world in which we live. Growth, health, and strength require affliction! Consider Christ!

Hebrews 5:8, "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered."

Yes, He was and is God. Accordingly, it is natural to assume that in His incarnation, Christ grew up without any trial and difficulty. After all, as God it was in His power to ordain an easy life! Yet we know that would NOT have produced a servant, BUT a sloth! Accordingly, God brought Jesus through severe trial and difficulty which began when He was born (think of His

parent's flight to Egypt) and continued throughout His life! In His life, Christ was described as, "...a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief..." (Isaiah 53:3).

Hebrews 4:15, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in ALL things as *we are*, yet without sin."

Was this testing because the Father did NOT care about Him? NO! It is because the Father loved Him (cf. Matthew 3:17)! Trial and difficulty is that which produces growth and maturation in this age! And so it is with us!

Hebrews 12:6, 8, "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives... [In fact] if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons."

What parent is there who is happy to give in to their children's ill-informed desires?

- What parent feeds their children candy for breakfast?
- What parent tells the child that "if they don't want to be educated, they don't have to"?
- What parent is content to allow their child always to get their own way?

If you love your child, you will discipline them! Their health requires it! That is why we ought NOT be surprised at the instruction given to His people here. Why is it that God brought His people into exile? Because He loved them too much to allow them to continue in their sinning! As that is the case, what ought the exiled child of God conclude about God's disposition toward them? That He loves them!

Ezekiel 39:22, "And the house of Israel will know that I am the Lord THEIR God from that day onward."

Proverbs 23:13-14, "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol."- this passage is incredibly strong! The discipline of a child is a crucial element that God uses in raising them up as children of God! Refuse to discipline them and you are delivering their soul to Sheol/Hell! Why is that?

Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go [lit. 'in his own way'- In other words, give a child what he wants and NOT what he needs, and do you know what will happen?], even when he is old he will not depart from it."

A child without discipline is as a garden without care... both will be overrun with thistles and weeds! Truly, "it is for discipline that we endure" (Hebrews 12:7a)! And so again, to withhold discipline from a child is NOT an act of love, BUT the opposite; it is to testify that you don't really care about them!

Proverbs 3:11-12, "My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father, the son in whom he delights."

God told His rebellious church in Laodicea:

Revelation 3:19a, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline..."

So why the trials and difficulties of this life? Why does God at times take that which is most precious to us?

Hebrews 12:8, "If you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons"!

Psalms 119:75, "I know, O Lord, that Thy judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me."

Accordingly, the child of God understands that it is always for his good... this is his conviction!

1 Corinthians 11:32, "But when we are judged [that is, tried and afflicted], we are disciplined by the Lord IN ORDER THAT we may not be condemned along with the world."

2 Corinthians 4:17, "...momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

Psalms 119:67, 71, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Thy word... It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes..."

John Newton made this wonderful observation in this regard:

We are disciples; Jesus is our Master. The world we live in is His school and every person and event is under His management, designed to forward us in the great lessons which He would have us to learn such as self-denial, a distrust of creatures, and an absolute dependence upon Himself. In this view, afflictions are mercies, losses are gains, hindrances are helps, and all things, even those which seem most contrary, are working together for our good. (Newton, 2007)

If you were for slaughter, God would fatten you with an easy life! But because you are for His glory and He is for our pleasure, He is committed to molding and shaping us so that our greatest passion both now and in eternity would be Christ! That is why the informed man or woman of God does NOT despise the discipline of the Lord, BUT accepts it as it is: A Statement of the Love, Care, and Commitment of God for and to You!<sup>4</sup>

This was the lesson God wanted His exiled children to understand. Where they were was NOT



the result of a lack care on the part of God; in fact it was the exact opposite! They were where they were because God loves His people! I want to close with the words of Thomas Watson:

God's afflicting rod has comfort in it, as it is a token of the special favor He bears towards us. We think that God cannot favor us unless He pampers us in His lap. Yet He loves and favors us when He gives us the bitter drink of affliction. God's chastening rod and God's love both stand together. The rod is a token of God's love. It is no love in God, to let men go on in sin and never smite. Is it love to your child to let him run into the water and drown?... ¶ Take notice: God spares the rod in anger! God's hand is heaviest when it is lightest! God punishes most when He does not punish! But God smites His people that He may save them, and is that not love? Let me feel God's smiting hand so that I may have His loving heart. (Watson, 2018, p. in light of Revelation 3:19)

Once again, herein we see the tragedy of shrinking back. When you understand that this world is NOT a friend of grace and so we must not get too cozy with Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:14-16). The net-result of all worldly opposition against God's people will be for the benefit of God's people, Ezekiel 39:9-10. Trial, tragedy, suffering, and woe is received by the child of God as evidence of the Love of God- who will not allow us free access to our sin!

## Works Cited

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## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> cf. Judges 8:6; 1 Samuel 17:54; 31:9ff; 2 Samuel 4:12.

<sup>2</sup> That this just wasn't a musing of Nebuchadnezzar, but a proclamation sent to the entire nation, see Daniel 4:1!!

<sup>3</sup> In this context, I am always profoundly struck by this thought... When the bitter Christian was first saved, he no doubt was so thrilled over the prospect of spending eternity with God and His people that they would have **volunteered** to suffer if it brought glory to God: **"Here I am! Send me!"** Yet now that God has **BLESSED THEM** with a **good job** (which they just lost), a **wonderful marriage and children** (of which one now has cancer or has died), etc., **they** respond in anger and withdraw?! Again, how sad! In the words of Samuel Rutherford, "He is an ill debtor who gives back that which was loaned to him with a grudge!" (This is a modified quote from the *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Letter II, p. 34) It all goes to show that "in fair weather, we must mend the sails" and not sit on the deck expecting life to be a cruise!! Let's purpose now to proclaim the excellencies of God to the world through the trials and difficulties of life! That is the purpose of Bitter Providence!

<sup>4</sup> cf. Job 5:17-18; Psalms 119:71; Philippians. 3:10-11.