

Ezekiel 43
Psalm 78:1-5, 54-69
Hebrews 9:11-28

“Ichabod No Longer”

March 6, 2011

The old man sat by the gate fidgeting uneasily as he looked toward the west.
A young woman, nine months pregnant, stood by his side,
watching attentively as well.

The ground trembled, and in the distance they heard the echo of a great shout.
“Do you see anything?” he asked. “My eyesight isn’t what it once was.”
“No, father,” she replied, “Ebenezer is more than ten miles away!
But my Phinehas should have arrived with the ark of the covenant by now!
When the Philistines realize that the God of Israel has come to the battle,
they will be trembling with fear!”

“Not so much fear as I,” said the old man.
“I shouldn’t have let them take the ark of the covenant into the battle.
At the very least I should have asked young Samuel.
The LORD is with that lad – even if he did warn
that the sin of my house would never be atoned for!
My ears are still tingling with the warning that he gave.”

“But father, with your sons, the priests there,
surely Yahweh will go before his people –
even as he struck the Egyptians at the Red Sea,
even as he parted the Jordan River and gave us the land!
The glory of the LORD is with Israel!”

The old man sighed.
“But I am the high priest.
The ark of the covenant belongs in the Most Holy Place –
not out on the battlefields of Israel.
My sons are treating the glory of the LORD like a magic talisman.
And I have done nothing to stop it.
I tremble, daughter-in-law, because my heart forebodes
that the abominations of Hophni and Phinehas,
which I have permitted, will cost me dear this day!”

“Oohh!” cried the woman, as she doubled over in pain.

The old man smiled grimly.
“You had better get back to the women – your time, too, is at hand!
Go! I will watch.
O God of our fathers, what is this that I have become?
A blind man has become the watchman of Israel!”

As sunset spread across the western sky,
the blind man remained seated at his post, trembling with fear.

Then, he began to hear one voice cry out – and then another –
and soon all the city of Shiloh was echoing
with the cries of women and old men and children.

“What is this uproar?”

A voice came out of the darkness:

“I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today.”

“How did it go, my son?”

“Israel has fled before the Philistines,
and there has also been a great defeat among the people.
Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead.”

“Ahh, then it is not as I feared...”

“Oh, and the ark of God has been captured.”

“My lady, I need to tell you something.

I know this is not a good time – but there is never a good time for the news I bring.
Your husband and his brother, Phinehas and Hophni, died in the battle.
And when I told your father-in-law, he almost seemed relieved –
until I mentioned that the ark of God had been captured,
and then Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate,
and his neck was broken and he died.”

“Did you say that the ark of God was captured?

Then the glory has departed from Israel.

Our priests are dead – and the presence of God has been taken from us.

Oh!”

“Do not be afraid, do not be afraid, for you have borne a son!”

“Ichabod”

“What do you mean?”

“Ichabod. No glory. The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

We sing about this story in Psalm 78.

Sing Psalm 78:1-5, 54-69

Read Hebrews 9:11-28

When we looked into the Most Holy Place in Ezekiel 41-42 last week,
what was missing?

There was no glory!

There was no gold anywhere – just carved wood.

There was no Ark of the Covenant – just an empty space.

Why did Ezekiel see the vision of an empty temple?

A temple that was truly *ichabod* – having no glory?

When Moses built and consecrated the tabernacle,
the glory of the LORD came and filled the tabernacle;

but then Eli and his sons (together with all Israel)
emptied the tabernacle of its glory.

Ichabod!

When Solomon built and consecrated the temple,
the glory of the LORD came and filled the temple;

but then the house of David (together with all Israel)
drove the glory of the LORD out of the temple.

Ichabod!

Now, when Ezekiel sees the heavenly temple (notice that this is a temple made without hands –
there is no builder – nor any command to build it),
the glory of the LORD comes and fills the temple.

If you want to understand the gospel,
understand this:

this is a temple made without hands;

this is a temple filled with the glory of the LORD that cannot be driven away!

This is what Jesus has done!

What Ezekiel sees in Ezekiel 43 is the final answer to Ichabod.

1. The Glory of the LORD Returns (43:1-9)

a. Coming from the East (v1-5)

¹Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. ²And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. ³And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face.

When Ezekiel sees the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east,
the first thing he thinks of is the *last time* he saw the glory of the LORD –
when the glory of the LORD departed from the temple,
when “he came to destroy the city.”

The glory of the LORD is a terrifying glory.
The glory of God should not fill us with warm fuzzies!
The coming of the glory of God *is* good news *this time* –
but Ezekiel falls on his face as he sees the coming glory,
because coming of the glory of God *is* the coming of God in judgment.
The LORD is in his holy temple – let all the earth be silent before him!

⁴As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, ⁵ the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple.

And once again, like in Ezekiel 2, in the first vision,
the Spirit of the LORD picks him up and sets him on his feet,
so that he can hear the voice of the LORD.
But this time, the Spirit also transports him and brings him into the inner court.

The temple – which just a few minutes before had been an empty shell –
devoid of glory –
is now filled with the glory of the LORD.

This temple needs no gold.
This temple needs no Ark of the Covenant.

Because Jesus himself – the Lamb that was slain – is the lamp, the glory, of this temple!

b. This Is the Place of My Throne (v6-9)

⁶ While the man was standing beside me, I heard one speaking to me out of the temple, ⁷and he said to me, "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever.

The voice of the LORD now speaks from the temple.
God says that the temple is “the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet.”

Heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool.

God's purpose in the temple is to dwell with his people forever.
In the Garden of Eden, God dwelt with Adam and Eve.
But ever since then, God's dwelling has been at a distance,
veiled in wood, stone, and gold.

And the reason is abundantly clear from verses 7-8!
It is because God's people have defiled his name!

Only in this new temple will the purification of God's people take root in their hearts!

And the house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name, neither they, nor their kings, by their whoring and by the dead bodies of their kings at their high places, ⁸by setting their threshold by my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them.

Israel shall no more defile my holy name

- 1) Whoring – remember Ezekiel 16 and 23
- 2) dead bodies of their kings (the issue seems to be some sort of ancestor cult)
- 3) infringement of sacred space (kings building royal tombs/or chapels for other gods in the temple compound – Manasseh known for this)

But don't think that this happened only to Israel!
We defile the holy name of God when we allow his holy space [us – our bodies]
to be corrupted with our selfish agendas!

Do you believe that your bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit?
Then you defile the holy name of Jesus when you use your body selfishly!
When your eyes turn to the impure,
when your ears eagerly listen to gossip,
when your tongue then repeats it!
when your fingers type that which hurts another –
or your feet take you on an errand of mischief –

all these are a profanation of the holy name of Jesus!

They have defiled my holy name by their abominations that they have committed, so I have consumed them in my anger.

The end of verse 8 points out that Israel's abominations
resulted in God consuming them in his anger.

If our abominations – our wickedness – keeps resulting in our being consumed by God's anger –
then we need to be cleansed of our sin and defilement
if we are to live in the presence of God.

⁹Now let them put away their whoring and the dead bodies of their kings far from me, and I will dwell in their midst forever.

God will not dwell with abominations.

If you are refusing to obey God in one area of your life –
if you are committing abomination
(and John says that *sin is abomination*)
so if you refuse to put away your whorings in one area –
then don't be surprised if God seems distant.

If you are running after the sins that you *should* hate –
then you are running away from God.

God says that he will dwell in the midst of his people
when his people *put away their whoring* –
when they humble themselves and obey me rather than their own preferences.

Verses 10-12 then explain the reason for this vision:

2. The Importance of Shame in the Law of the Temple (43:10-12)

¹⁰"As for you, son of man, describe to the house of Israel the temple, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and they shall measure the plan.

The reason why God gives this vision to Ezekiel
is so that Israel "may be ashamed of their iniquities."

Do you realize that your sin – your iniquity – has driven God from your midst?

And do you realize that there is nothing you can do to make God come back?

When I was a teenager I once told God that I wanted nothing more to do with him.
As I turned to walk away, I suddenly realized that there was no way
for me to undo what I had just done!
And so I whispered "Please, someday, call me back!"

You will notice that in all of Ezekiel 40-43 there is no command to *build* this temple.
Ezekiel is to *describe* this temple.

And verse 11 insists that Israel is to *observe its laws* –
but there is nothing that Israel can do to make the glory of God return.

Indeed, when the exiles return and rebuild the temple under the direction of Zerubbabel,
they weep and mourn
because the glory of the LORD does not fill Zerubbabel's temple.

Zerubbabel's temple is Ichabod – without glory.

Verse 11 then says that if Israel *is* ashamed of their deeds,
then Ezekiel is to write down the whole vision:

¹¹And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple, its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, that is, its whole design; and make known to them as well all its statutes and its whole design and all its laws, and write it down in their sight, so that they may observe all its laws and all its statutes and carry them out.

In other words, it is only when you come to see the shamefulness of your past
that you are prepared to see the glory of what *God* has done in Jesus!

As Block puts it,

“The glorious news of the gospel is not that we are worthy of access to him,
but that he receives us in spite of our sin.
However, that God invites us as we are
does not mean that he accepts our condition as satisfactory.” (Block 590)

God *calls* you to come as you are –
but he will not let you stay “as you are.”

You must be ashamed of all that you have done –
and you must repent and believe the gospel,
and therefore observe all its laws and all its statutes and carry them out.

Verse 12 is something of a transition to the following section:

¹²This is the law of the temple: the whole territory on the top of the mountain all around shall be most holy. Behold, this is the law of the temple.

God has just told Ezekiel to write down the law of the temple –
but Ezekiel has not yet heard the law of the temple,
and so now God lays out the law that accompanies the new temple.

This law will occupy our attention for the next couple weeks.

There are lots of similarities to the Mosaic Law,
but there are also lots of differences.

If Ezekiel thought of this simply as a restoration of Mosaic statutes,
then he could have simply said, “and they will do everything commanded by God
through his servant Moses.”

But the old covenant has been so thoroughly broken,
that the old law cannot simply be reinstated.

As I have been suggesting,
Ezekiel describes the new covenant in terms of Moses–
just like Hebrews describes the old covenant in terms of Christ.

But the fundamental law of the temple is that the whole territory on the top of the mountain shall be most holy.

In other words, the holiness of God's temple – the sanctity of God's dwelling place – is the highest priority in Ezekiel's temple.

And Hebrews certainly agrees that holiness is essential:

“Strive for peace with everyone,
and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” (12:14)

And this holiness can only come through the altar.

After giving the fundamental law of the Temple,
Ezekiel immediately turns to the most important place in the temple: the altar.

In Ezekiel's temple, the altar is at the exact center of the temple.
If you are standing at any one of the three outer gates, looking in,
you would look up the seven steps into the outer court –
and a couple hundred feet away,
you would see up the eight steps through another gate to the inner court,
where you would see, 400 feet away and around 20 feet up,
the altar.

3. The Law of the Altar (43:13-27)

a. The Measurements of the Altar (v13-17)

¹³“These are the measurements of the altar by cubits (the cubit being a cubit and a handbreadth): its base shall be one cubit high and one cubit broad, with a rim of one span around its edge. And this shall be the height of the altar: ¹⁴from the base on the ground to the lower ledge, two cubits, with a breadth of one cubit; and from the smaller ledge to the larger ledge, four cubits, with a breadth of one cubit; ¹⁵and the altar hearth, four cubits; and from the altar hearth projecting upward, four horns. ¹⁶The altar hearth shall be square, twelve cubits long by twelve broad. ¹⁷The ledge also shall be square, fourteen cubits long by fourteen broad, with a rim around it half a cubit broad, and its base one cubit all around. The steps of the altar shall face east.”

Why is the altar included here – rather than in the tour of chapters 40-42?

In Exodus 20, after God gives the Ten Commandments,
the law of the altar is the very first thing that God gives his people.

Think about that:

when God made a covenant with his people and gave them the first Law – the Torah –
the very first thing he does after giving them the Law,
is show them how to deal with sin!

Likewise, as God is now restoring his people –
as he is once again promising to dwell with them –

the very first thing he does after giving them a new temple,
is show them how to deal with sin!

Also it is interesting to note that when Solomon built the temple,
the altar is described in *one* verse (2 Chronicles 4:1)
here the altar requires a detailed description.

I should mention again that many Hebrew architectural terms are very obscure,
which makes it difficult to reconstruct Ezekiel's altar.

The word "rim" in verse 17 probably refers to a gutter
which was designed to allow the blood of the sacrifices to drain away from the altar.

What we do know is that the altar is 12 cubits square,
with a 14 cubit square ledge.

If you put together all the measurements,
the whole structure appears to be 20 cubits square and 6 cubits high
(curious, in light of the fact that Solomon's altar was 20 cubits square and 10 cubits high)

In other words, this altar would be around 34 feet square and 10 feet high –
it would entirely fill this room.

The steps of the altar face east:
in other words, as the priests ascend the steps of the altar,
they would be looking straight into the temple.

But God had said to Moses unequivocally
"You shall not go up by steps to my altar, lest your nakedness be exposed on it."
(Ex 20:26)
But now there are steps leading up to God's altar! (And it is the same Hebrew word)

Curiously, Josephus tells us that the 50 x 50 cubit altar in Herod's temple
was raised 15 cubits high (around 40 feet from the ground) –
but it was accessed by a ramp, not by steps!
Ezekiel's vision could not convince Israel to violate Moses' statute!

What should we make of this?
Again, we are seeing that Ezekiel's vision is of a temple that fulfills the Mosaic pattern,
but is not exactly Mosaic.
And it is only in the book of Hebrews that we finally see what Ezekiel was trying to say.

Verses 18-27 then describe the consecration of the altar,
so that it can be used in the worship of God.

b. The Consecration/Atonement for the Altar (v18-27)
There is something *very* important about the pronouns in verses 18-27.

Especially the pronoun “you” – second person singular.

¹⁸And he said to me, "Son of man, thus says the Lord GOD: These are the ordinances for the altar: On the day when it is erected for offering burnt offerings upon it and for throwing blood against it, ¹⁹you shall give to the Levitical priests of the family of Zadok, who draw near to me to minister to me, declares the Lord GOD, a bull from the herd for a sin offering. ²⁰And you shall take some of its blood and put it on the four horns of the altar and on the four corners of the ledge and upon the rim all around. Thus you shall purify the altar and make atonement for it.

The text is perfectly clear:

Ezekiel is the one who will purify the altar and make atonement for it,
on the day when it is erected!

Notice the different roles:

Ezekiel will purify the altar with the sin offering on the first two days.

The priests of the house of Zadok will offer burnt offerings (v24),
and will complete the atonement for the altar for the next five days.

²¹You shall also take the bull of the sin offering, and it shall be burned in the appointed place belonging to the temple, outside the sacred area. ²²And on the second day you shall offer a male goat without blemish for a sin offering; and the altar shall be purified, as it was purified with the bull. ²³When you have finished purifying it, you shall offer a bull from the herd without blemish and a ram from the flock without blemish. ²⁴You shall present them before the LORD, and the priests shall sprinkle salt on them and offer them up as a burnt offering to the LORD. ²⁵For seven days you shall provide daily a male goat for a sin offering; also, a bull from the herd and a ram from the flock, without blemish, shall be provided. ²⁶Seven days shall they make atonement for the altar and cleanse it, and so consecrate it.

The consecration/atonement of the altar will take seven days –
so that on the eighth day, the altar will enter into its regular liturgical function.

The basic idea is that stone, by itself, is unworthy of serving as an altar.

Why?

Because the earth itself was cursed because of man’s sin!

In order for this altar to become cleansed and consecrated,

it must be sanctified – it must be purified.

And the only way to make anything pure is through blood!

And so there are both burnt offerings and sin offerings offered.

The burnt offerings are burnt on the altar.

The sin offerings are burnt outside the sacred area –

Why?

Ordinarily, the priest would eat a portion of the sin offering,

but in cases like this, the whole sin offering would be burnt outside the temple
because the sin offering had “absorbed” as it were the defilement of the altar.

Blood must be shed in order to make atonement –

in order to reconcile God to the cursed stones of the altar!

(Dust you are and to dust you shall return!

But God takes cursed stones and cleanses them with the blood of Christ
so that we might become living stones in his holy temple!)

If you compare Ezekiel's role in the consecration of the altar here
with Moses role in Exodus 29,

you immediately see that Ezekiel plays Moses opposite Zadok's Aaron.

The mediator of the covenant (Moses or Ezekiel) consecrates the altar.

Of course, Ezekiel will be dead long before this altar is built!

[I haven't spent much time refuting the view

that Ezekiel's temple will be rebuilt in the so-called millennial kingdom;

but if you run across someone who holds that Ezekiel 40-48 *must be* interpreted literally,
ask them if Ezekiel will return from the dead to consecrate the altar!]

Of course, there is another option!

Why has God kept calling Ezekiel "Son of Man"? (ben-adam? Son of Adam?)

Ezekiel will be long dead before this altar is consecrated,

but then again, this altar is not exactly literal!

As Hebrews 9:22-26 says,

"Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood,

and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites,

but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

For Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands,

which are copies of the true things,

but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf...

But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages

to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

Ezekiel's vision is all about Christ –

which Ezekiel sees in the shadowy forms of Moses.

Indeed, anyone who says that Ezekiel's temple must be built "in the last days"

denies Christ!

Because *Christ* is that which Ezekiel's temple is all about!

If you say that this temple is *not* Jesus –

then you are saying that Christ's sacrifice was *insufficient* for God to accept us!

²⁷And when they have completed these days, then from the eighth day onward the priests shall offer on the altar your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, and I will accept you, declares the Lord GOD."

For Ezekiel's altar – just like Moses' –
the consecration ritual is an eight-day ritual,
which means that (once again) the worship of Israel would begin on Sunday –
the first day of the week.

Jesus rose on the first day of the week.
Eight days later he appeared to his disciples again.

And on the ultimate eighth day – the fiftieth day ($7 \times 7 + 1$) –
on the day of Pentecost, Jesus poured out his Spirit upon his church,
as the great high priest whose intercession guarantees
that God will forever accept us!

In other words, because Jesus has cleansed the heavenly altar with his own blood
now the Father will accept you.

And because Jesus has offered a once-for-all sacrifice,
his blood cleanses us from all sin!

The glory has returned.

Psalm 93