

Ezekiel 4-5 “The Theater of the Doomed”
Psalm 147; Revelation 21

Why would you worship a God like that?

Perhaps I can understand why someone would worship a God who destroys his enemies,
and delivers his own people.

But here, the LORD is saying that he is going to *destroy* his own people.

You may struggle with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah,
where God destroys men, women and children with fire from heaven.

Many cringe at the story of the Conquest,
when God told Joshua to slaughter all the Canaanites, men, women, and children.

But now we hear that God is going to come upon *his own people*
with “anger and fury and furious rebukes.”

“I will vent my fury upon them.”

“I will make you a desolation and an object of reproach among the nations.”

Why would you worship a God who would do this to *his own people*?

I’m not going to let you off the hook here!

I’m not going to say that God is different today.

Because Jesus is the one who says to the *church* in Sardis,
in Revelation 3:1-3

“I know your works.

You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die,

for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Remember, then, what you received and heard.

Keep it, and repent.

If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief,

and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.” (Rev. 3:1-3)

King Jesus, the Divine Warrior,

will come in judgment against that church that refuses to obey him!

Jesus may come in judgment against Michiana Covenant –

the PCA – the OPC –

or any other church on earth –

but

and here is the key!

Jesus will never come in judgment against the heavenly Jerusalem,

because he has established it securely by his atoning sacrifice.

And that is what we sing about in Psalm 147.

When we sing Psalm 147, we need to sing it about the heavenly Jerusalem!

Sing Psalm 147

And if you want to know what that heavenly Jerusalem is all about:
listen to Revelation 21.

Read Revelation 21

Introduction

We are citizens of that heavenly city.
That is our true home.

And as we go through the book of Ezekiel,
I want you to ask:
What does it mean to be Jerusalem in the midst of Babylon?
What does it mean to be the people of God in exile?
After all, the apostle Peter speaks of *us* as elect exiles today.

Last time we saw that Ezekiel is sent to the rebellious house of Israel.

If you boil it all down,
there are three basic problems with Israel's beliefs:

- 1) they do not understand who God is –
they do not understand his holiness –
but they think that he will protect Jerusalem no matter what.
- 2) they do not understand how serious sin is –
They think that they are “okay” –
sure we sin sometimes (who doesn't?!),
but the God of Abraham and Israel –
would never turn *against* his own people!
Which means,
- 3) they do not understand how glorious grace is –
Their hope is for the restoration of Jerusalem,
so that life can “get back to normal.”

And I would suggest that we have also been sent to the rebellious house of Israel.
After all, we are surrounded by baptized people who don't go to church –
or who have some sort of church background, but have rejected it.
Or for that matter, maybe they *do* go to church,
but they don't live like it.

- 1) People in our day don't understand who God is!
“Oh the God I worship would never bring judgment on innocent children!”
Instead, they think that God is there for their personal benefit.
Which leads to the second problem:

2) They don't get how bad sin is!

Sure, I've made some mistakes –
but I'm not a bad person!

But this also means

3) They don't get the gospel!

As long as you think you're "okay" –
then you don't really get the gospel.

It is only when you understand *you deserve* the judgment of Ezekiel 4-5
that you come to marvel at the *grace* of God

in sending his son to bear our iniquities –

to take upon himself the punishment that we deserved.

If you don't get who God is –

if you don't get how bad sin is –

then you won't get how glorious is the gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

1. Act ONE: The Siege of Jerusalem (4:1-17)

The sign of the brick (4:1-3)

"And you, son of man, take a brick and lay it before you, and engrave on it a city, even Jerusalem. 2 And put siegeworks against it, and build a siege wall against it, and cast up a mound against it. Set camps also against it, and plant battering rams against it all around. 3 And you, take an iron griddle, and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; and set your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege, and press the siege against it. This is a sign for the house of Israel.

Children,

Let's say you are one of the exiles.

You have been living in Babylon for about five years.

People are wondering, "when will we get to go home?"

"When will God have mercy on us and let us return to Jerusalem?"

"I'll be glad when they say to me, 'let us go to the house of the LORD!'"

And then one day you see this young man engraving a picture of Jerusalem on some clay.

And he brings it and sets it down in the square.

And he takes the dirt and starts piling it up around the brick,
like siegeworks and a mound.

"What are you doing Ezekiel?"

But he doesn't answer.

Instead, he starts molding little tents all around the brick,

like a besieging army –

and perhaps he used twigs or straws as "battering rams."

"Okay, we get it – you think Jerusalem is going to be besieged – *again!*

But Yahweh won't allow Babylon to triumph over Jerusalem."

But then he takes an iron griddle and places it between him and the brick,
and then he lies down on his left side.

“What are you saying, Ezekiel?”

“Are you saying God won’t listen to us?

That our prayers will bounce off the heavens like an iron griddle?”

But Ezekiel made no reply.

He just lay there.

And all day as you came and went,

you would see Ezekiel there lying on his left side –

with a big iron skillet between him and the brick.

I want you to think about the effect of this.

For 390 days he lies on his left side.

And remember that at the end of chapter 3,

Ezekiel was told that he would be mute,

except when God directs him to speak.

So every day for more than a year,

you would have seen Ezekiel enacting the siege of Jerusalem.

No words.

But every day for 390 days, Ezekiel would do this.

Then suddenly, without warning, without commentary,

he switched over to his right side – and continued there for 40 days more.

Bearing Israel’s iniquity (4:4-8)

4 “Then lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it. For the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their punishment. 5 For I assign to you a number of days, 390 days, equal to the number of the years of their punishment. So long shall you bear the punishment of the house of Israel. 6 And when you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side, and bear the punishment of the house of Judah. Forty days I assign you, a day for each year. 7 And you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem, with your arm bared, and you shall prophesy against the city. 8 And behold, I will place cords upon you, so that you cannot turn from one side to the other, till you have completed the days of your siege.

And God tells Ezekiel that he is to “bear the punishment

(it could also be translated “bear the iniquity”) of the house of Israel.”

Remember that Ezekiel is a priest.

The high priest was to bear the sin of Israel when he entered the holy of holies.
Now Ezekiel, priest in exile, must bear the iniquity of Israel.
But here, there is no atonement.
There is no sacrifice.
He bears the iniquity of Israel purely in a symbolic way –
demonstrating that this judgment will come upon Israel.

What are these numbers doing here?

So the 390 days/years has to do with Israel as a whole.
Verse 5 says that God has assigned Ezekiel
“390 days – equal to the number of the years of their punishment.”
(or iniquity)

Jerusalem fell in 586 BC.
If you add 390 years, you get 976,
which is just about exactly the time when Solomon finished the temple,
and the glory of the LORD filled the most holy place.

So 390 years is the period of Israel’s iniquity –
from the time of Solomon, the king who first turned aside to worship other gods.

The 40 days is closely connected to the 40 years wandering in the wilderness
(Num 14:33-35).
Jerusalem will be in exile for 40 years – just like the wilderness generation.
And the purpose is the same as well – to eliminate the rebellious generation.

And if you add 390 to 40 you get 430 –
the number of years that Israel spent in Egypt according to Exodus 12:40.

But also, after 390 days of lying on his left side,
Ezekiel changes his posture for the last 40 days:
He lies down on his right side!
And then he bares his arm.

Baring his arm is a warlike action.
What are you saying, Ezekiel?
Is God is going to bare his arm and deliver us?
But Ezekiel, why are you looking so grim?
Why have you set your face against the city?

But Ezekiel is utterly silent for 14 months!

What would you think of such a man?

Most of the exiles would have said something like this:
Ezekiel is just loony.

He's saying that God is going to abandon Jerusalem.
He's saying that God is going to reject his covenant.
But God would never do that!
Jerusalem is the city of God.
When foreign kings assemble against Jerusalem, Yahweh drives them away.
He delivered David – he delivered Hezekiah – he delivered Josiah –
God will sometimes chasten us for our sin,
but he will never reject us.
We are God's people!

Therefore Ezekiel is nuts.

Do you see the similarity with people around you?
They're defining who God is based on who they *want* him to be –
and yes, they accept *some* of what God says – but not all!

How many people do you meet who say they believe the Bible,
and say they believe in God,
but would be horrified at the God of Ezekiel?

Well, let's move on to

The food of the destitute (4:9-17)

9 "And you, take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and emmer, and put them into a single vessel and make your bread from them. During the number of days that you lie on your side, 390 days, you shall eat it. 10 And your food that you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from day to day you shall eat it. 11 And water you shall drink by measure, the sixth part of a hin; from day to day you shall drink.

There are two different parts to Ezekiel's diet.

There is the multi-grain bread of verses 9-11,
and there is the barley cake of verse 12.

There are also two explanations of the diet –

the explanation of the barley cake in v13,
and the explanation of the multi-grain bread in verses 16-17.

The bread in verse 9 consists of scraps –

take whatever bits of grains and beans you can scrape together,
and make a loaf of bread.

Every day for 390 days Ezekiel would eat 8 ounces of this bread,
and drink 2/3 of a quart of water.

This is a starvation diet.

And that is the point – as God explains in verses 16-17.

The siege of Jerusalem will "break the supply of bread in Jerusalem."

And for 390 days, Ezekiel would waste away.

Every day for 13 months the exiles in Babylon would see Ezekiel

lying on his side.
And at the same time every day he would eat his 8 ounces of bread,
and drink his 2/3 quart of water.

The point would become very vivid to the exiles:

You don't get to go home.

You are going to live here – in Babylon.

And quite frankly, it will be better here – because back home they are going to starve!

12 And you shall eat it as a barley cake, baking it in their sight on human dung.” 13 And the Lord said, “Thus shall the people of Israel eat their bread unclean, among the nations where I will drive them.” 14 Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I have never defiled myself. From my youth up till now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has tainted meat come into my mouth.” 15 Then he said to me, “See, I assign to you cow's dung instead of human dung, on which you may prepare your bread.” 16 Moreover, he said to me, “Son of man, behold, I will break the supply of bread in Jerusalem. They shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and they shall drink water by measure and in dismay. 17 I will do this that they may lack bread and water, and look at one another in dismay, and rot away because of their punishment.

And so God gave Ezekiel another sign.

The sign of the barley cake.

The point here is not the composition of the bread.

The point here is how it is baked:

“baking it in their sight on human dung.”

Verse 13 gives an immediate explanation of this.

“Thus shall the people of Israel eat their bread unclean,
among the nations where I will drive them.”

This is not a siege diet.

This is an exile's diet.

If you read through the books of the Law,

you will not find any explicit statement forbidding the use of human dung in cooking.

(Incidentally, in Hebrew this is the ordinary agricultural term for “dung” –

and the LXX uses the equivalent Greek word – *not* the more shocking word that Paul uses in Philippians 3)

So why does Ezekiel claim that this is unclean?

In Dt 23:12-14, God had commanded that human excrement
needed to be buried outside the camp.

The image there is that God walks among you,

and it would be highly objectionable if he stepped in something!

So Ezekiel objects that he has never eaten anything unclean –
and so God permits him to use cow dung instead.

This permits Ezekiel to remain technically clean –
but still forces him to eat something highly distasteful.

What's the point here?

Well, how is Jerusalem supposed to live in the midst of Babylon?
How can the people of God remain “clean” in the midst of an “unclean” nation?
God's point to Ezekiel is that you may not be able to avoid dung.
But do your best to maintain purity during your exile.

This is a good reminder as we live as Jerusalem in the midst of Babylon today:
because Paul will use the language of clean and unclean in 2 Cor 6:16-19
when he urges us to “go out from their midst, and be separate from them,
says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing;
then I will welcome you,
and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty.’

And Paul concludes from this,
“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves
from every defilement of body and spirit,
bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” (7:1)

Paul says that even though the purity laws of Leviticus are not in force today –
the *principle* of the purity laws still matters!
If we are going to live as Jerusalem in Babylon –
as the people of God in exile –
then we need to be a holy people – a separate people, distinct from Babylon.

2. Act TWO: The Fate of Jerusalem (5:1-4)

5:1 “And you, O son of man, take a sharp sword. Use it as a barber's razor and pass it over your head and your beard. Then take balances for weighing and divide the hair. 2 A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are completed. And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the sword after them. 3 And you shall take from these a small number and bind them in the skirts of your robe. 4 And of these again you shall take some and cast them into the midst of the fire and burn them in the fire. From there a fire will come out into all the house of Israel.

All this is strange enough.

For 14 months Ezekiel is daily enacting signs of judgment upon Jerusalem!
But for 14 months he has been lying there silent.
Every day you would walk past Ezekiel until you were so used to his silent protest
that you didn't really think about him any more.

Until the day that he picked up and started shaving himself!

In the ancient world, it was generally considered a sign of disgrace to be shaven.
Deuteronomy 14:1 forbade the Israelites
from cutting themselves or making bald patches on their foreheads.
The priests, in particular, were forbidden to do this (Lev 21:5).

So when Ezekiel starts using a sharp sword to shave himself,
he is compromising his own priesthood.

Because a sword is not generally a safe instrument for shaving!
It would be virtually impossible to avoid cutting himself.

“As Ezekiel’s horrified neighbours stared at the apparition before them –
this gaunt spectre of a starving man, shaved bald with his hair in piles at his feet,
tears of pain stinging his eyes and blood trickling
from the gashes in his taut malnourished skin –
they were looking into the mirror of their own future as a people.
But Ezekiel was not finished yet.” (Wright, 84)

He gets a scale and starts meticulously weighing the hair into three equal parts.
(just as the people of God will be weighed in the scale of divine justice!)
He puts some of the dung-fire onto the brick with the picture of Jerusalem –
and then he throws a third of the hair into the fire.
 (“that’s not good”)
He takes the second part of hair and scatters it around the brick,
and then takes the sword and starts slashing at the hair.
(everyone jumps back – “he’s mad!” someone cries –
Ezekiel stops and stares at the crowd, and sadly shakes his head)
Then he takes the third part of hair
and tosses it up into the air,
and the wind takes it and scatters it all over the square,
and starts waving his sword after it.

(Then someone asks, “will God not leave a remnant?”)
The gaunt haggard bald prophet smiles grimly,
picks up a few hairs and tucks them into his skirt.

(“Ah!” cries a woman, “The Lord will leave a remnant –
he will have mercy!”)

Too soon!
Because Ezekiel is reaching back into his robe,
and pulling out some of those few hairs,
and throwing them into the fire!

Don’t get cocky!

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:12,
“Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall!”
Do not forget who God is!
Do not forget how terrible sin is!
And do not forget the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ!

And then, finally, after more than a year of silence,
Ezekiel speaks (read verses 5-6).

3. God’s Interpretation of the Acts (5:5-17)

a) “This Is Jerusalem: She Has Rebelled...More Than the Nations” (v5-6)

5 “Thus says the Lord God: This is Jerusalem. I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. 6 And she has rebelled against my rules by doing wickedness more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries all around her; for they have rejected my rules and have not walked in my statutes.

Verses 5-6 form the indictment – the city is arraigned before the divine court,
“This is Jerusalem”
The accused is identified by name,
and the charges are presented.

In a sense, you could say that the exiles’ interpretation of the Psalms was right:
Jerusalem is at the center of the universe!

All of God’s covenant promises come together here:
his promise to Abraham that he would give his seed the land –
his promise to Israel that he would dwell in their midst –
his promise to David that he would always have a son on the throne –
his promise to Solomon that he would hear the prayers of his people
from his holy temple.

But...

You forgot something!

I said that I would be with you and bless you –
if you walked before me and were blameless,
if you walked in my ways and kept my statutes,
if your sons listened to my voice and did what I commanded.

But you haven’t!

You have rebelled against me!
In fact, you are *worse* than all the nations around you,
because you *knew* better.

None of the nations around you received such wise and just laws (Dt 4:7-8).

I gave you my laws and statutes –
You were my unique and holy people.

But instead of being a light to the world,
you became “the world’s darkest blot” (Block, 199).

And so in verse 7, the third-person indictment, changes over to a 2nd person verdict:

b) “Therefore...I, Even I, Am Against You” (v7-10)

7 Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you, 8 therefore thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, even I, am against you. And I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. 9 And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again. 10 Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers. And I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to all the winds.

It’s not just that Israel has broken *God’s* law.

Jerusalem has not “even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you.”

What does that mean?

Someone might argue that God’s standards are too high.

Hey, your laws may be perfect, but we’re not!

Give us a break!

Cut us a little slack!

And so God says, “fine, I’ll judge you by the standards of the nations!”

But even by the moral standards of Babylon and Egypt,
you fail!

The kings of Jerusalem had entered into treaties with Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt –
shifting from allegiance to allegiance,
depending on which way the political winds were blowing.

Then they would break their treaties as soon as it seemed convenient!

You have no honor and integrity!

Even the nations around you have more honor than you do!

And so Yahweh says, “I, even I, am against you.”

Literally: “behold me, against you, even I”

It would be hard to pen a more dramatic challenge in the Hebrew language!

It is a challenge to single combat.

Over and over again throughout the scriptures God had said,

“Behold, I am with you.”

But now Yahweh has taken his stand against Jerusalem,
in the sight of all the nations.

The nations are called to witness the contest between Yahweh and Jerusalem.

It is fitting: they had been called to witness the covenant in Deuteronomy 29.

Now they are called to witness its dissolution!

And what is the central reason for this?

“because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again.”

The word “abomination” can be used in a general sense to refer to anything that is disgusting and repulsive.

But it also has a more theological sense – to refer to things that are disgusting and repulsive to *God*.

A Hebrew child might complain that brussel sprouts are abominable – and many adults would agree!

But no one would say that brussel sprouts are abominable to God!

This word “abomination” is used 118 times in the Bible, 17 times in Deuteronomy – which focuses on idolatrous actions and objects.

Isaiah uses it three times.

Jeremiah uses it eight times.

But it is used 42 times in Ezekiel.

Israel’s idolatry is repulsive and disgusting in God’s sight.

And so in verse 10, God declares his judgment:

10 Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers. And I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to all the winds.

God had warned in Leviticus 26:29 that if they rebelled against him,

“you will eat the flesh of your sons” –

and the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28:53-57 included the horrific warning that rebellion would result in a siege in which parents would eat their children.

Having proclaimed the verdict,

Yahweh now takes an oath to fulfill it.

c) “I Will Have No Pity...I Am the LORD; I Have Spoken” (v11-17)

11 Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord God, surely, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations, therefore I will withdraw. My eye will not spare, and I will have no pity. 12 A third part of you shall die of pestilence and be consumed with famine in your midst; a third part shall fall by the sword all around you; and a third part I will scatter to all the winds and will unsheathe the sword after them. 13 “Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the Lord—that I have spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them. 14 Moreover, I will make you a desolation and an object of reproach among the nations all around you and in the sight of all who pass by. 15 You shall be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and a horror, to the nations all around you, when I execute judgments on you in anger

and fury, and with furious rebukes—I am the Lord; I have spoken— 16 when I send against you the deadly arrows of famine, arrows for destruction, which I will send to destroy you, and when I bring more and more famine upon you and break your supply of bread. 17 I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will rob you of your children. Pestilence and blood shall pass through you, and I will bring the sword upon you. I am the Lord; I have spoken.”

This is an irrevocable decree of judgment.

God takes an oath that he will

- 1) withdraw his protection from Jerusalem
- 2) vent his fury upon his rebellious people
- 3) make them a desolation and object of reproach
- 4) execute judgment upon them
- 5) send famine wild beasts, pestilence, and war

I will have no pity.

I will not back off.

There will be no modification or amelioration of this verdict.

Why does God do this?

Please see “the fire of divine passion” for Jerusalem.

“He had not entered into this relationship lightly,
and he cannot stand idly by while it is threatened.

The intensity of his wrath at the defilement of his sanctuary and the repudiation of his will
arises out of the profundity of his covenant love.

Because he loves so deeply, he must respond vigorously.” (Block 211)

Just think about it this way:

if your husband or wife committed adultery,
would you respond by saying, “hey, that’s alright – don’t worry about it!”

No!

You would be angry and jealous – and rightly so!

And in the case of Israel, this was not just a one-time “oops.”

This was persistent, constant, utter rebellion.

If you understand the holiness of God –

then you will begin to understand the magnitude of sin –

the righteousness of God’s judgment against sin –

and therefore you will marvel at the stunning grace of God in Jesus Christ!

Because Ezekiel’s “dramatic actions” point us forward to the greatest sign-act of all:
the incarnation of the Son of God.

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, bore the iniquity of his people,

not just symbolically, but as their substitute,

taking upon himself the wrath and curse that we deserved –

the fury and anger of the LORD against *our* sin,

was poured out upon Jesus.

The verdict and judgment of Ezekiel 5 was proclaimed against the Son of God.

“The cross is an ‘in-your-face’ message of God’s love and his wrath,
his justice and his grace....

It refuses to trivialize sin,

insisting that only the death of the Son of God was sufficient to atone for it.

It refuses to compromise with our cozy delusions of adequacy,

whereby we fondly imagine that our best efforts

will be enough to satisfy the demands of God’s holy law.” (Duguid, 95)

And in the sacraments we have God’s own “sign-acts”

that dramatically re-present God’s once-for-all sign act.

We are baptized into Christ’s death –

We partake of bread and wine,

“which remind and assure us that the efficacious sacrifice
was made for us personally”