



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

## MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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### An Exposé of Idolatry, Part 4

As children of God, we know we are going to be disciplined. Proverbs 3:11-12: Solomon wrote, “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” (Proverbs 3:11-12). In fact, “It is for discipline that you endure...” (Hebrews 12:7). If it wasn’t for the disciplining hand of the Lord, we would stagnate in our growth and development as Christians! In fact, consider the role that the disciplining hand of the Lord had in Christ’s development as our Savior:

Hebrew 5:8-9, “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect [having been matured through suffering] He

became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.”

All of this is to say, if we are sons and daughters of God, we are going to be disciplined by the Lord.

Now most often, the MANNER of God’s disciplining hand is mysterious. Just as the comings and goings of the Spirit of God are mysterious (John 3:8), so also is God’s disciplining hand. In this regard we see a variety of ways in which God deals with His sinning people. The Lord at times will lift His grace and allow the sinning child a fuller taste of the wages of his sin.

Proverbs 5:22-23, “His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin...”

One of the most under-appreciated redemptive graces of God is the fact that at all times the Lord is withholding the consequences of our daily sin. Christian, listen, “The wages of sin [all sin... ‘innocent’ sin... ‘insignificant’ sin, ‘acceptable’ sin] is death” (Romans 6:23a). Accordingly understand: every time we sin it is a grace of God that we do not shrivel up and die- that is how toxic our sin is! Yet God’s grace restrains these consequences that we might live. In this regard, one way the Lord addresses a sinning Christian is to lift His grace and give them a fuller taste the wages of the sin they so eagerly want!

Secondly, the Lord at times will stop up our path to sin with thistles and thorns.

Hosea 2:6-7: “Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths...”

Though in my folly I at times resent the trials and difficulties of life. Nevertheless, when I understand the wisdom of God here, I praise the Lord for this form of discipline!

Thirdly, the Lord at times will withhold His covenant presence.

Psalm 66:18, “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.” (cf. also Isaiah 59:1-2).

We just spent quite a bit of time on this in connection to Ezekiel 5-11. Another way the Lord deals with His sinning children is to withhold redemptive privileges and/or blessing -- like not responding immediately or fully to our prayer.

Fourthly, in extreme cases, the Lord at times might even cut short a Christian’s life on this earth. Speaking of the Corinthian mess, Paul wrote, “For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep” (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). An extreme way God might deal with a rebellious Christian is to remove him from this world.

These are some of the ways -- unpredictable ways -- God addresses sin in the life of His child!

Yet there are passages which indicate a PREDICTABILITY when it comes to how God deals with particular sin on the part of His people and- our text is one of them! The structure of Ezekiel indicates that chapters 12-24 is the rationale for the discipline of the exile. In a word, the cause of the exile was on account of idolatry, the idolatrous thoughts and actions of God's people! And chapters 13-14 indicate that when it comes to idolatry, God has a very clear way in dealing with this sin in the life of the Christian.

From our study of Ezekiel 14, we have learned that idolatry is at the heart of all sin. Furthermore, we also acknowledge that the discipline that God administers when it comes to sin is varied and broad. However, the text is NOT talking about idolatry in general, BUT idolatry in its advanced state. When this is the case; when the sin of Idolatry matures in the life of the child of God such that it is incarnated in his living, we learn from our text this morning that the Lord has a very specific approach when it comes to dealing with it.

We are going to consider the divine response to idolatry.

Ezekiel 14:4, "Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and *then* comes to the prophet, I the Lord will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols.'"

First off notice that we are dealing here with idolatry in an advanced state. The idolater in this passage NOT only had begun to reap the consequences of this sin in his life ("the stumbling block of iniquity" was "right before his eyes"), BUT he also had the audacity to stand before the Lord and request a communication via the prophet! It is as Jeremiah speaking of God's people, "...you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame." (Jeremiah 3:3b). Such were the people of God in Ezekiel's day with their idolatry. In their depravity, they sought to use the prophetic office to legitimize their sin! This is bold-faced sinning indeed!

Now when Idolatry gets to this advanced state, God has a definitive answer! When Idolatry reaches an advanced state in the life of the child of God, the idolater will be opposed by God Himself.

Ezekiel 14:8, "And I shall set My face against that man..."

This is a strong expression in Scripture which first was used when God gathered His people into a nation at the time of Moses. If the people of God proved faithful to the Covenant, they would be blessed (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). But if they proved faithless, God would "set His face against them" (cf. Leviticus 20:3-5) which is a serious thing! In the context of our text, the expression is ironic! The Hebrew indicates that the error of the people of God was that they had "set idols before their faces" (Ezekiel 14:4, 5, 7). As a response, "God would set His face against them and their idols"!

Rather than the nation being blessed by God, and let's define what that means, we use the term "blessing" quite a bit in the church. Yet what does the term denote? First off notice, average is NOT blessing. To reap an anticipated harvest when all things are equal does NOT reflect a blessing of the Lord.

The story is told of the fellow preacher who years ago adopted hook, line, and sinker the church growth methodology in planting churches. When anyone asked him why he subscribed to such methodology, he said, "The Lord is blessing it." And from the outside looking in he appeared to be correct. The problem with this methodology is that it works just as effectively for Mormons and many other cults. And if God is truly blessing using these techniques, don't you suppose the effort of genuine servants of God would yield a much higher return? Christian, average is NOT blessing!

Accordingly, to speak of the blessing of the Lord in Scripture is to speak of *more than expected*.

Psalm 127:1-2, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep*."

This is what we are talking about when we speak of blessing; fruit that goes way beyond what is expected! In contrast, when we speak of God "setting his face against His people" we are talking about something that is *FAR LESS THAN EXPECTED*. That is exactly what was promised if God's people rebelled against the Lord. When God formed His people into a nation, this is what God promised if Israel gave themselves to sin,

Deuteronomy 28:38-43, "You shall bring out much seed to the field but you shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant and cultivate vineyards, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather *the grapes*, for the worm shall devour them. You shall have olive trees throughout your territory but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. You shall have sons and daughters but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity. The cricket shall possess all your trees and the produce of your ground. The alien who is among you shall rise above you higher and higher, but you shall go down lower and lower"

This is what occurs when God "sets His face against a people." The expression denotes a squelching or the withholding of the fruit/benefit of a person's labor! Accordingly, Jeremiah told the people of God, "Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am going to set My face against you for woe...' (Jeremiah 44:11). The word for "woe" is one and the same as "cursing." Because God set Himself in opposition to His people, they would only reap pain, trial, and misery in life! God told His people:

Leviticus 26:17-18, "And I will set My face against you so that you shall be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when

no one is pursuing you. If also after these things, you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins.”

Do you see it? To have God’s face set against a people is for that people to reap far less than what would be expected.

Now translated practically into the life of a believer, it means far less fruit, joy, growth, spiritual prosperity, etc. than would be expected when it comes to living the life of faith. Yes, behind every sin is an idol, but when the Christian *gives themselves* to an idol that which truly is important dries up! We see it in David’s life.

Psalm 32:3-4, “When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. [This is the opposite of blessing] For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away *as* with the fever heat of summer.”

Speaking of the rebellious people of God in the wilderness, the Psalmist said:

Psalm 106:15, “And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.”

This isn’t God dealing with His people’s sin by withholding blessing. This is God dealing with His people’s sin by squelching blessing! Notice the ultimate cost when money becomes an idol:

1 Timothy 6:10, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.”

In an advanced state, the Idolatry of money will reap only pain and suffering in this life! We could go on and on citing examples! Such are the wages of Idolatry in the life of the child of God! And yet, it doesn’t stop here; there’s more. The idolater will reap so much misery that their life could become a warning to all of the wages of this sin.

Ezekiel 14:8b, “And I shall set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb...”

For something or someone to be a “sign or proverb” they have to attain a certain status of notoriety amongst God’s people that is well-remembered years later. For example,

- Solomon attained this status. No explanation would be needed in Israel if one referenced the *“wisdom of Solomon.”*
- Samson attained to this status as a *foolish warrior.*
- Amongst God’s people, everyone knew of *the gravity of Samuel* and so his seriousness when it came to the Lord’s service.
- The first seven years of his ministry, Ezekiel was “a sign” to the people of God (Ezekiel 12:6)- so also was Hosea (Hosea 1:4-9) and Isaiah (Isaiah 8:18). As a result, God’s people in Babylon would have understood what was meant by *the nutty behavior of the prophet.*

To attain the level of being “a sign or proverb” is to become a timeless example of and so a standard for godliness, devotion, service... or FOLLY!

When it comes to idolatry, the latter is what occurs!<sup>1</sup> That means, not only does the idolater reap misery in their life because their rebellion (the first point), BUT their misery will be so extreme that they will become Proverbial, “And I shall set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb!” Recall if God set His face against His people, what would happen?

Deuteronomy 28:38-43, “You shall bring out much seed to the field but you shall gather in little... You shall plant and cultivate vineyards, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather *the grapes*... You shall have olive trees throughout your territory but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil... You shall have sons and daughters but they shall not be yours... The alien who is among you shall rise above you higher and higher, but you shall go down lower and lower.”

These are the horrible consequences when God sets His face against a people. Yet what makes this that much worse is the promise that was made in the verse immediately preceding this warning where God told His people this:

Deuteronomy 28:37, “And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a taunt among all the people where the Lord will drive you.”

This isn't the first or last time God said this. Sometimes in dealing with recalcitrant Christians, God deigns to set them up as an example for the rest of God's people! As for the rebellious nation God said this:

Jeremiah 24:9, “And I will make them a terror *and an* evil for all the kingdoms of the earth, as a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse in all places where I shall scatter them.”

This promise is oft-repeated in the Old Testament relation to God's people as they existed as a nation.<sup>2</sup> If as a nation, they gave themselves to idols, God would use them as a proverb for all time! What makes the passage before us unique, is that Ezekiel quotes this consequence in relation NOT to the nation, BUT the individual Christian!

This is very sobering! When a child of God gives themselves to idolatry, they very well could reap a broken and shattered life. If at this time they do not repent, their misery and pain could increase to proverbial proportions such that their cursed life becomes a good example for the people of God of a bad example!

Notice lastly, a third predictable consequence when it comes to Idolatry is that the idolater could suffer disqualification when it comes to his service or life.

Ezekiel 14:8, “And I shall set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I shall cut him off from among My people...”

This is the last and final consequence referenced in Scripture when it comes to God’s response to extreme rebellion amongst His people. It was utilized quite frequently in the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> Translated to the New Testament, the expression refers either to excommunication or physical death.<sup>4</sup> When it comes to excommunication, Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 5:4-5 “In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, *I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

This is the explanation for what Christ meant when he spoke of letting a rebellious Christian “be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (Matthew 18:15-17)! Understand on account of the fall, the kingdoms of the world have been given over to Satan (Luke 4:6) to rule over as he wishes. Yet God does NOT allow Satan free reign over the Christian. Part and parcel of citizenship in the Kingdom of God is protection from this accursed angel...

1 John 5:18, “We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him.”

Yet in the case of the rebellious Christian who will NOT give up his sin, the Lord will lift this covenant protection and allow Satan free reign over that individual. This is what is going on in Church Discipline/Excommunication. The individual is “cut off from among God’s people” for the destruction of his body that his spirit may be saved!

Yet there is a second connotation in the New Testament for being “cut off from among God’s people,”

1 Corinthians 11:29-30, “For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.”

Paul here is talking about physical death as when Uzzah forfeited his life for touching the ark (2 Samuel 6:7) or Nadab and Abihu lost their life because they offered to God an unlawful incense in worship (Numbers 3:4).<sup>6</sup> In these cases we do NOT believe that these men lost their souls. However, because their sin was so bad, God cut short their service in His kingdom! Now if the greatest privilege in life is NOT pleasing oneself BUT serving the Lord, then having a life cut short on account of sin is a horrible, tragic event! Yet such is the horrible wage of Idolatry!

Now throughout our study I have said that I do NOT believe any here will suffer the discipline referenced in this text. If that is true, then why spend an entire sermon on this? For that matter, if the believer’s salvation is secure, why are there so many warnings in Scripture of the

perils of falling away? The answer is that God uses such warnings to sober the child of God to keep them from taking any step toward rebellion!

John Bunyan picked up on this theme in the Pilgrim's Progress. Toward the end of their lives, right before entering into glory, Christian and Hopeful have the following interaction:

Then I saw in my dream, that in the morning the shepherds called up Christian and Hopeful to walk with them upon the mountains. So they went forth with them, and walked a while, having a pleasant prospect on every side. Then said the shepherds one to another, 'Shall we show these pilgrims some wonders?' So when they had concluded to do it, they had them first to the top of a hill called Error, which was very steep on the farthest side, and bid them look down to the bottom. So Christian and Hopeful looked down, and saw at the bottom several men dashed all to pieces by a fall that they had had from the top. Then said Christian, 'What meaneth this?' The shepherds answered, 'Have you not heard of them that were made to err, by hearkening to Hymenius and Philetus, as concerning the faith of the resurrection of the body?' They answered, 'Yes.' Then said the shepherds, 'Those that you see lie dashed in pieces at the bottom of this mountain are they; and they have continued to this day unburied, as you see, for an example to others to take heed...'

That is exactly what we see in God's word. For example, after describing the apostasy of God's people in the wilderness, the Hebrew writer said,

Hebrews 4:1, "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it."

Is it possible for the child of God to lose his salvation? No! But let the apostasy of others sober us that we might look upon all rebellion as serious! After detailing the sordid history of God's people, Paul said,

=1 Corinthians 10:6, "Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved."

2 Peter 2:6b, "...[God] condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter."

Such no doubt was the intended result of our passage in the lives of God's people in exile! What we read here ought to shock us and sober us that we might NOT take lightly any idolatrous thought, desire, or act! The Chinese Philosopher, Lau-Tzu (~*Lau-tsa*) said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Such also is the case with gross idolatry... it begins with a single, seemingly insignificant step! May God use the text before us to sober us that we might not take even the slightest step toward this horrible sin!



## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> This is what God promised would be the fate of the nation if they rebelled. D. I. Block wrote, “Indeed, the full force of the idiom is described in Yahweh’s warning to Solomon of the consequences of idolatry in 1 K. 9:6–9 (= 2 Chr. 7:19–22): He would make Israel a ‘proverb’ (māšāl) and a byword (šĕnînâ) among all peoples by cutting the nation off from the land and casting his temple out of his sight. The response of passersby will be astonishment (šāmēm), hissing (šāraq), and puzzlement over Yahweh’s treatment of his own covenant people.” (*The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24*, pp. 430–431)

<sup>2</sup> cf. 1 Kings 9:7, 8; Psalm 44:13, 14; Jeremiah 19:8; 25:9; 29:18; etc.

<sup>3</sup> It is used 36 times in the Pentateuch alone!

<sup>4</sup> D. I. Block commented, “Although there is some debate about the precise meaning of “being cut off from one’s people,” it must involve at least excommunication from the religious community of Israel, hence denial also of access to Yahweh. But the fact that hišmîd, “to destroy” (as in v. 9), and he’ēbîd, “to destroy” (Leviticus 23:30), may be substituted for hīkrît suggests more serious consequences, probably premature death directly at the hands of God.” (*The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24*, p. 431)

<sup>5</sup> cf. also Revelation 3:16.

<sup>6</sup> We see that this was the option chosen in the case of Korah, Phineas and Hophni, and Sapphira and Ananias.