

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 7, Jerusalem Condemned but Eventually to be Restored, Ezekiel 14:12-16:63

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen and his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 7, Jerusalem Condemned, but Eventually to be Restored. Ezekiel 14:12-16:63.

We continue our studies in Ezekiel by coming to chapter 14, verse 12, and moving on into the 16th chapter. 14:12 actually is, if you move on from 14:12 to 15:8, this section has two subsections. No, what I'm really saying is that 14:12 to 15:8 is one subsection, and then another long one is chapter 16.

But in 14:12 to 15:8, we do have two messages, and we can tell that because of that formula which marks separate sections. 14:12, the word of the Lord came to me, and then 15:1, the word of the Lord came to me. And there is one sign of the separate beginnings.

But there are also parallel endings. If we look at chapter 14, we have the recognition formula in verse 23, and you shall know that it is not without cause that I did all that I have done in it. And this is a variation of you shall know that I am the Lord.

And that latter formula is what we find in chapter 15 and verse 7. So those are the two subsections within this first half of our overall section. Not surprisingly, the content of 14:12 to 15:8, these two messages, is the inevitability of the fall of Jerusalem and the fate of its citizens. And because of the recognition formula, when these things happened, it would be proof, concrete evidence of God's punitive intervention.

From verse 13 of chapter 14 onwards to chapter 20, there's an argument presented. It presents four hypothetical cases. And it's saying, just suppose, just suppose, just suppose, just suppose, four hypothetical cases.

The first one is that suppose a nation acted faithlessly against God, and God sent a providential famine that killed off people and animals. Just suppose that there were three holy people, righteous people, who interceded with God to stop it from happening. And we get a mention of, in verse 14, Noah, Daniel, and Job.

And this middle person, over against these two ancient characters of Noah and Job, the middle person, Daniel, here seems to be the good and wise king, known to us as Danel in Canaanite texts, so equally old. But suppose they interceded with God to

stop it from happening. Well, in this case study, they don't succeed beyond saving their good lives, their own lives, because they're good lives, they're good people.

God's mind is made up and on reasonable grounds, because they're faithless people as a whole. So that's the first hypothetical case about this faithless nation and what its fate has to be. Its fate is certain and unchangeable.

And then we come on in verses 15 and 16 to another argument. Just suppose that that sinful nation is overrun by wild animals, which cause not only destruction but danger for the inhabitants. What then? Well, how about intercession? Once again, intercession stands no chance when the wild animals represent God's fixed judgment.

There's a poignant note introduced here in 15 and 16, mention of not being able to save sons or daughters, sons or daughters. And it's deliberately poignant because it points at the 597 prisoners of war, and many of those had left family members behind, who would be involved if Jerusalem fell. Eventually, those sons and daughters would be involved, and would they die? Would they die? And here, well, there's no hope for them, really.

The message implies the prisoners of war could not claim their children should be spared. No such guarantees could be given. And so, an interesting, poignant aspect of that particular argument there.

And then 17 through 18, another supposition. How about if there's a military attack? And the same scenario is played out in this game of what if. And once again, this grim mention of sons and daughters not being saved.

The last one is pestilence or plague, and that's in 19 through 20. And no sons or daughters were saved. And so there we are, looking forward to the fall of Jerusalem and the end of its inhabitants.

Very grim. But then, 21 through 23, it's introduced by the messenger formula. And so, we're moving on to another message, actually.

Thus says the Lord God. But it's a continuation because it says, how much more? Those suppositions, well, it's going to be even worse if you actually locate this situation in Jerusalem and a faithless people of Judah. God mentions four deadly acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild animals, and acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild animals, and pestilence to cut off humans and animals.

But it does make a concession. I heard your concern; God is saying for those sons and daughters. And there will be sons and daughters coming into exile.

And you might think, oh, yes, trophies of grace. Oh, how marvelous that they were spared after all. You know, they didn't deserve it.

Just as those people who died didn't deserve it. But how wonderful we've got our family back together again. Praise the Lord.

But there's a different scenario played now. Because those children that come, they come as witnesses to the destruction of Jerusalem, yes, and of Judah. But also they come as witnesses of the Judah's faithlessness.

And they're going to tell stories of how this had to happen because the people had been rebellious against God. And so these prisoners of war from 597 would be forced to accept the fall of Jerusalem as morally fair. And they would admit the spiritual logic behind it.

They would have to come to terms with the unthinkable happening and understand that it had to happen. They would be forced to add their own amen to these terrible happenings that for so long they denied would ever happen. And so, of course, here in this overall message, there's again a denial of false hopes that the prisoners of war would soon be going home and going back to their homeland.

No, no. If they're lucky, some survivors will come to them and perhaps even their own family members. But even that won't be a happy reunion.

There would be unhappiness in the stories those sons and daughters had to tell. In chapter 15, we come to a separate message. And instead of those arguments, those what-if arguments, here there's a metaphor that runs through it.

And it's a metaphor that goes back to winemaking and the cultivating of the vine. And you say, well, why would you cultivate the vine? Well, you wanted the grapes. But there was another use because after the grape harvest, there needed to be pruning.

And there was a use for the wood of the vine. Those vine prunings would be carefully collected and put into bundles. And they would be used as fuel for cooking and eating.

And so that would be so good. But in fact, that was the only use you could put that wood to. You couldn't do anything else with it.

You couldn't make furniture with it. But you could put it on the fire and cook your food on it. And so those vines were pruned away, but the prunings were not thrown away.

They'd be used as firewood. They had no other practical use, but they were good for something, for the fire. And, of course, what's being done here, they get the application in verse 6, like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I've given to the fire for fuel so that I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

They're going to be my firewood. And I'll throw them on the fire. And when the Babylonians attack and set those wooden buildings on fire, they're going to be trapped, and they're going to die as well.

The fire shall consume them. And then you will know that I am the Lord. I will make the land desolate because they have acted faithlessly.

And there's that frame that we've got. These two messages, 14:12 down to 15:8, they begin with this supposition about a land sinning by acting faithlessly in verse 13. And then it ends on the same note.

I will make the land desolate because they have acted faithlessly. So, a careful frame should be used around these two separate messages, which both have the same message of the inevitable fall of Jerusalem and its people. But then we come to chapter 16.

And it's a long read, chapter 16. It's the longest chapter in the book of Ezekiel--and it's quite a new message.

What it does, it takes a metaphor and it goes to town with it. It really develops and extends it in great detail. And then it gets applied to Jerusalem.

And the application comes actually in verse 12 before the metaphor does. Mortal, verse 2 of chapter 16, mortal, make known to Jerusalem her abominations and say, thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem. And then the metaphor begins, but it's pretty obvious it's a metaphor relating to Jerusalem.

And so, in fact, there's an intermingling of metaphor and interpretation as we go along. And there's this centering upon Jerusalem. Do you remember there was an accent in the first part of the book against Jerusalem and its faults and the necessity for destruction? Well, we come back to that now.

In 14:12 through 15:8, it was about the land. There was that other theme of the land in the first part, but now we're backtracking to Jerusalem once more. And this is all a tirade against Zion theology.

Zion theology doesn't work. It seems to work for a while, but it's not going to work now. You're past that.

You've gone beyond it, and it cannot work for you anymore. And we've got the imagery of an unfaithful wife who is punished. But it's so much more than that.

Because in fact, as the chapter goes on, you see it falls into two main sections, and eventually, you come to a turning of the tide within this very chapter. And so, the bulk of the chapter is obviously looking forward or looking ahead to 587, but at a certain point, you're looking back. You're looking back at 587, and there's a message of salvation.

This is not only a message of judgment from this literary form of the chapter; it's moving on to a message of salvation. And so, verse 53 will say, I will restore their fortunes. I will restore their fortunes.

And that includes Jerusalem. Talking about three cities, including Jerusalem, I will restore their fortunes. And so, it looks beyond that great disaster of 587.

Some of Ezekiel's messages earlier in the book already take into account what's going to happen after 587. And historically, they seem to belong to the new message that Ezekiel could bring after 587. But here, it's put back as a supplement.

Ezekiel was able to write a supplement. There was a happy ending or a relatively happy ending, shall I say, because Ezekiel likes to bring in that judgment with a small J when he talks about his oracles of salvation in the first part of the book.

Anyway, it's certainly a more positive message than the first half. And Jerusalem is rhetorically addressed all the way through. Your origin, your birth, your father, your mother.

And this is a rhetorical address. And really, in this first half, it's the 597 prisoners of war who are listening to what Ezekiel is saying. Now, when there's an oracle of judgment, we were saying the other day that it tends to fall into two main sections.

It can be just talk about punishment. But more usually, it starts with a statement of accusation that justifies the judgment. And very often, too, there's a therefore that links the accusation with the punishment to come.

But occasionally, an oracle of judgment goes beyond that. Or rather, it adds a new beginning. And that happens, for instance. One example is Isaiah's song of the vineyard in chapter 5, where Judah is his vineyard, certainly, and it's going to be torn down.

And so, it's definitely a metaphor for disaster for the people of Judah. And there is an accusation that in this metaphor of the vineyard, it didn't produce good grapes. It didn't produce good grapes, but only poor wizened grapes that weren't worth eating.

And so that takes the form of the accusation. And it's explained a bit further in literal terms. But before that, before that, before the punishment, before the accusation, there comes an extra passage, which speaks of God's lavishing his care upon that vineyard.

And so it speaks of the vineyard that the owner dug and cleared of stones, planted with choice vines, built a watchtower in the midst of it, hewing out a wine vat in it. He expected it to yield grapes. But then the bombshell of accusation, it yielded wild grapes that weren't worth eating.

But there's this deliberate preface so that when you come to the accusation, and when you think of it beyond the metaphor, it's like a slap in the face. After all that God had done for his people, he fancied them turning around and not producing the covenant fruit that he wanted. And so that's very much the message.

And then another case, of course, even more well known, is in the narrative of Genesis 2 and 3. In chapter 3 of Genesis, we have the accusation we have the punishment being driven out of the garden, and so on. But early on, we get the beautiful things that God had done for Adam and Eve. He provided a garden for them.

He provided food for them. He provided water. It was a place of precious stones.

God had done everything for them. And it was a wonderful life. And yet there was a slap in the face that they turned round and disobeyed him.

And so, these are two instances. Here, we get a third example in Chapter 16 of Ezekiel. And it's a sort of a Cinderella story, a rise from rags to riches.

Here is an unwanted baby girl who's exposed out in the wilds, but eventually, she becomes a queen. So that's the story. And it says that this child was a very poor stock.

Your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. Your origin, your birth were in the land of the Canaanites. And this is a fact that Jerusalem came very late into the kingdom of Israel, only in David's time.

It was never conquered before that. It was a Canaanite enclave, so it had roots of paganism.

And so, there's that warning note: beware Jerusalem. You think it's a wonderful city, but think of those pagan origins. That's turned you off.

Jerusalem has got some bad genes in it, hasn't it? And perhaps they'll show themselves at some stage. And this is the thinking by mentioning this pagan background. It's just like a sort of an original sin, which is going to come out at some point to reappear.

Well, this baby girl was abandoned just after birth and before a midwife could give her the customary care that a baby would have. And she was exposed to death. But God happened to pass by, and he rescued her, playing the part of a good Samaritan.

And that was so good. So she didn't die. She thrived under God's blessing.

And the years went by and God met her again. And now she was sexually mature. And what did he do? God married her.

He married this beautiful woman. And he entered into a covenant of marriage. And as her husband, he lavished on her the best of clothes and jewelry and nourishment.

And she became a queen. And, of course, historically, her queenliness reflects Jerusalem's status as a royal city. But such was God's grace.

That was the happy starting point of this story. But we sense it's going to turn into something nasty. And so, it does.

And in 15 to 34, now comes the accusation. Because Jerusalem became sexually unfaithful. In fact, this wife of Yahweh became a nymphomaniac.

And in 15 to 22, the reality behind this metaphor at this point it's a metaphor that represents religious unfaithfulness and the importation of pagan worship into the way that Jerusalem lived. Canaanite religion was adopted. Even with child sacrifice, God's grace was forgotten.

His gifts were lavished on other gods who were her new lovers, so there's a religious faithlessness. In 23 to 34, sexual unfaithfulness stands for political entanglement with other nations, with Egypt, Assyria, and eventually Chaldea or Babylonia.

Jerusalem is held responsible as the center of royal administration. That was where the royal officials were, and that was where the government was based.

And so, it was Jerusalem's fault. Jerusalem controlled foreign policy. And it says in verse 20 that even the Philistines were appalled at Jerusalem's outrageous behavior.

Fancy that. The prophets often viewed, especially Isaiah, the prophets often viewed foreign alliances as an indication of a lack of trust in Israel's God. And so, it is here.

And so, the analogy of unfaithful wife is used politically to refer to recent political involvements turning to other powerful nations as if they could be the Jerusalem savior instead of Yahweh. Very much taking a leaf out of Isaiah's book at this point. And meanwhile, God became angry, rightfully angry, in verse 26.

So, you get a reaction from God. You played the whore with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, multiplying your whoring to provoke me to anger. And meanwhile, Jerusalem turned into a loser, losing its God-given assets as a tribute to its imperial partners.

And then, from 35 through the first half of 43, you begin with, therefore. And that's the sign that we're moving from accusation to punishment that must fall upon the one who's done wrong. And so, there's a brief summary of the accusation, winding the tape back from political unfaithfulness to religious unfaithfulness to the God of Israel.

And ironically, her political lovers are going to turn against her. Soon, they would carry out the divine verdict for adultery. The wife, the promiscuous wife, must die, must be stoned and die.

And for the murder of children because there was that religious unfaithfulness involving child sacrifice. And these lovers, these foreign lovers, would strip Jerusalem of her fine clothes. They would kill her, and they would set her home on fire.

In this way, God would satisfy his righteous anger and justice would be done. And he would hold Jerusalem responsible for her wrongdoing. Jerusalem's fall would be Jerusalem's fault.

We move on beyond 43a--43b to 58. The time came when that message of judgment could be replaced by a new one, by a more positive one, a different one.

And now there's still an overshadowing from the shameful bad things that now lay in the past. But this newness is revealed in 53 with this positive statement: I will restore their fortunes. And it's speaking of Sodom and Samaria and Judah.

And it goes on to say more relevant 53b, and I will restore your own fortunes along with theirs. And so, there's this strange placement alongside two other wicked cities, Sodom and Samaria. But there's this positive message: I will restore your fortunes.

And so, now we have moved on. We have moved on beyond 58. And what has happened is very much a thing of the past.

But it's still not wholly positive. It is a feature of Ezekiel's positive oracles that he finds room for something negative as a warning. But 587 had come and gone.

A larger group of exiles had joined those prisoners of war of 597. Now, the time has come for Ezekiel to give a more positive message. But characteristically, he likes to mix promise with challenge.

And this challenge, it's the judgment with the small j. Because all the exiles wore scars from their history of unfaithfulness. And there are scars that they would carry back to the land when they went back from exile. And the scars were emotional scars of suffering.

But they were also spiritual reminders of the sins that had been committed before 587, which had warranted that terrible tragedy that they had to go through. In fact, it was spiritually healthy for them to remember, to look at those scars, those psychological scars, and to remember them. It was a spiritually healthy thing to remember the history of bad behavior that lay behind Jerusalem's history and never to forget it.

I recall one of Rudyard Kipling's poems with the recurring refrain, lest we forget, lest we forget. And there's very much the feeling of this message here. And there must be repentance over their past.

And that repentance would include elements of shame and regret that act as a deterrent against taking the same wrong turnings ever again. And at this point, I think of the Apostle Paul, because of his earlier persecution of Christians, at one point he called himself the chief of sinners, or the worst of sinners, 1 Timothy 1.5. And he never forgot how he persecuted those Christians. And the memory bolstered a sense of undeserved grace.

And it was a helpful factor in his ongoing allegiance to God as an apostle. And so, it was to be for the exiles. So it was to be for the people of Jerusalem as they went back home again.

They had bad blood in their ancestral past. And they must never forget that. Jerusalem had deep roots in paganism.

And they had bad genes that showed up in later years. Beware, beware, let it not happen again. And so there is this shadow side to this message of restoration.

There were two other cities that had a bad reputation in Judah. One was Sodom, and one was Samaria. And you turn up, if you were from Jerusalem, you turned up your noses mentioned of both of them.

But God, shockingly, puts them alongside Jerusalem. And so you think they're bad. Well, how about you? How about you? And Ezekiel calls them members of the same family.

Sodom and Samaria are sisters to Jerusalem. They were Jerusalem's ugly sisters. But in fact, Jerusalem turned out to be the ugliest of them all in denying her faith and adopting paganism.

She was the worst of the family. Right. And then all this takes us down to 58.

And then the last part of the chapter is in 59 to 63. And this is a postscript to the chapter. It looks back and it's got a generalizing summary.

There are also other similar postscripts in the book. In my commentary, I've argued that these postscripts were added by editors later in the exile, who were inspired to add them to Ezekiel's own words. And this postscript repeats the need for the returned exiles to remember their past, not in a crippling way, not dragging them down, but as a means of maximizing their sense of indebtedness to God's grace.

Fancy, after all that, God forgave us and brought us back. The exiles were never to forget that they were sinners saved by grace. And God, too, was going to engage in remembering.

He was going to remember his original marriage covenant with Jerusalem and he was going to renew it. And so the old Zion tradition was going to come true again. And in fact, as an illustration of this new relationship with God, the exiles, after they'd returned, would not only return to Judah, but also take over the territories of Samaria and Sodom.

They would be that old United Kingdom once more. Jerusalem was to be the capital of a promised land that included these terrorists. And once again, I think of what Paul wrote.

And again, it's in 1 Timothy 1, but now it's in verse 14. Paul spoke of the grace that overflowed into his life. And he speaks that as one who'd been the worst of sinners, as he said back in verse 5 in that same chapter.

Grace overflowed into his life. And there's the same intention here at the end of this chapter where sin had abounded, and grace was to abound even more. And that's where the chapter takes us.

Now, summing up, Ezekiel 16 is not a nice chapter to read. It's a disturbing chapter. It's shocking in its sexual explicitness.

And I warn you, if you learned Hebrew, you would find it more shocking. English versions tone it down. Penises no longer get mentioned in our English versions, but they're there in the Hebrew text.

It's certainly not politically correct, this chapter, for contemporary readers. The chapter has the opening chapters of Hosea as its background. Remember that symbolic action of Hosea; he's told to get married, but the marriage proves to be a failure.

And then there's talk of divorce, but then eventually there's marriage again. And so that scenario had been played out in Hosea's life. And so, there's a reminiscence and an application of this to Jerusalem and to, it's much more developed as a metaphor, but the roots of it go back to Hosea's teaching, way back to the northern kingdom.

And the metaphor was to speak of these ups and downs in the relationship between God and Israel. Of course, Jerusalem has become the center of the metaphor, both because Ezekiel had been a priest and had lived there all his life, but because of the continuing emphasis that Jerusalem would fall, as happened in 587. And this is the sign of the end of everything.

When Jerusalem falls, it's the end. The land is no more, the monarchy is no more, the temple is no more, and everything goes if Jerusalem is lost. Now, it so happens that what encouraged Ezekiel to think in terms of this metaphor again was that in Hebrew, cities are always feminine.

Cities are always feminine. And so, it was quite natural in a way, linguistically, to make Jerusalem the marriage partner, the wife of Yahweh. And then too, Ezekiel could draw on the non-Israelite origins of Jerusalem, being a Jebusite city for so long before David conquered it.

But that fits and lends itself to the elaboration of the metaphor. And then, too, where the punishment of the wife is concerned, adultery was a capital offense in the Torah, in Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22, and so there's this terrible punishment carried out against Jerusalem. And this legal custom, this priestly custom, finds its way into the metaphor as it develops.

When we've said that, we're still left not liking the chapter overall, because there's a lurid aspect to it. There's a violent, vulgar-sounding blatancy that runs all the way through it, and it's definitely not nice, and one wouldn't read out these verses in church. But historically and theologically, it has a necessary blatancy in its own setting.

The exiles viewed Jerusalem as the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God was in its midst. It would never be moved.

So said Psalm 46, which we read out in a previous lecture. This was expressing what we call Zion theology. Ezekiel had to break this traditional paradigm, which was so ingrained in Judean thinking.

This, above all, must stand. Jerusalem must never fall. In order to break this paradigm, he has to use other traditions and customs, and also shocking language, blatantly shocking language, to convince the prisoners of war that Jerusalem had to fall.

Its fall was a divine inevitability. The people of Israel were generally as coy as the Victorians in speaking about sexual matters, and so this makes Ezekiel's language even more blatant in its explicitness. But it's a rhetorical ploy to shock the prisoners of war out of their optimism and to prepare them spiritually for a coming disaster.

He desperately needed to catch their ears and this was the only way that it could be done. They were so hardened in their own optimism that it had to be broken. Next time we will be looking at chapters 17 and 19.

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