

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 11, God's sword against sinful Jerusalem and Judah, Ezekiel 20:45-23:49

© 2024 Leslie Allen and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 11, God's sword against sinful Jerusalem and Judah. Ezekiel chapter 20:45-23:49.

Last time, we were looking at Ezekiel chapter 20 up to verse 44, and then we stopped. A new section begins in 45, and I would venture to say that the chapter division in our English Bibles doesn't help us very well. There's good reason for it to start verse 21 at our present verse 1 in our English versions because all of verse 21 is a group of messages that have a keyword in them, sword, sword, sword, all the way through chapter 21.

And so that must be the reason why it was decided in the English Bible tradition that we should start there at the beginning of the chapter. But if you look at the Hebrew Bible, you see there's a different tradition, and that starts what we call 20-45 is actually 21 and verse 1 in the Hebrew Bible. And I would want to argue that that is right.

But you might look through that last section in chapter 20 of our English text and say well, I can't see the sword there and that is very true. But in point of fact, I shall argue that the new theme is really opposed to a new keyword; a new theme starts in 20-45. It does make better sense.

Yes, we do have a collection of messages that begin with our 21:1, and we get this sword repetition all the way through as a keyword and yes, that keyword doesn't occur, but if we look closely as we're going to at that first section in our chapter 21:1-7 we shall see that it is closely based on the section the message that begins in 20-45-49 and in fact it's a deliberate reinterpretation in different terms of what was said in 45-49. And so let's see if that's okay as we go through it. But these do seem to be a pair of messages 20-45-49 and then 21-1-7.

Overall, we are going to be moving from 20-45 to 23-49, and there is a sequence there's a logical sequence in these chapters because we move from the sword, which stands for God's punishment, using the Babylonians as his agents and then in chapter 22 we go on to start explaining the reason why this punishment should happen, and in 22 we have an explanation of the sinfulness of Jerusalem that merits such punishment. When we come to chapter 23 once again, there's an explanation of the people's sinfulness, but it's the sinfulness of Judah that deserves this punishment and so punishment and then the reason why in the case of Jerusalem and the reason why

in the case of Judah and so this is a good collection here with its logical sequencing. The first message, verses 45-49, uses a metaphor, a metaphor of a forest fire, and any of us who live in California would be all aware of such a metaphor in terms of reality.

Who's the arsonist? That's always the question that arises in California. Did somebody set this fire? Did somebody not put out a fire after camping in a certain place? Who's the arsonist? Well, here, the arsonist is going to be God himself. He's going to set this forest fire. Where is the fire going to occur? Well, it depends on what version you read because in verse 46 in the New RSV, it says the Negev, the forest land in the Negev, which is the region to the very, very south of Judah.

It says in 47 the forest of the Negev. Now, in point of fact, if you look at the NIV, we find a different translation, which is very valid. It says the Southland, the Southland, a less specific word, a more generic word, the forest land in the Southland, the forest of the Southland and then we can see what we should see that this is a reference to Judah.

It's generally a reference to Judah in this first message. When we come to the reinterpretation, we shall see it to be that there's going to be a mention of Jerusalem and the sanctuaries and the land of Israel and that the land of Israel seems, in this case, to refer to Judah. And Ezekiel is told, verse 46, set your face toward the south, and we've met this before that as Ezekiel was prophesying he was to stare fixedly in the direction of the addressee or addressees, and here, of course, it's a rhetorical addressee Judah, but he's to face away fixedly as to the direction that Judah was far away from Babylonian exile.

The forest fire is going to be terribly severe. It's going to devour every green tree and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it.

There'll be such heat from this fire, and this is a very frightening message, burning up all the trees and even scorching the faces of everybody in the vicinity. Well, that's the message that he's told to give. Ezekiel doesn't want to give it, and he says they're not going to like this message.

They're going to find this too metaphorical and too allegorical, and they say, come on, Ezekiel, speak a bit more plainly. So, can I put it over in a different way, please? And that's the significance of verse 49. Ah, Lord God! That's his protest.

We don't often find Ezekiel interfering, but now and then, he does. He interrupts, and he has a viewpoint of his own. So, it's very striking when that happens in the book of Ezekiel.

It's all the way through in the book of Jeremiah but seldom here. I said ah, Lord God, they're saying of me, is he not a maker of allegories? He's afraid that this vivid, imaginative metaphor won't be understood, liked, or appreciated, and he pleads for a message that will unpack its meaning a bit more easily. Okay, says God, we will revamp the message, and instead of the forest fire, we'll use another metaphor but one that's easily recognizable.

We'll speak of the sword. The sword will obviously refer to a military attack, and we're really speaking in terms of the reality of a military attack. And so this is the new version.

We've got the old version, the end of 20, and we've got the new version, the first message in 21. And so that was a good reason why the Hebrew Bible put the break after 20:44 and started the new chapter. So, there's a logic in the English chapter division but I think a better logic in the Hebrew chapter division.

And so, this next message in 1 through 7 it goes through it again. It's got the same meaning, but there's this new word that is going to be a keyword all the way through the messages of 21. It uses this military language as imagery used before.

We have mentioned the land of Israel, as I said, which here stands for Judah presumably, and it mentions the capital, Jerusalem, in verse 2 of chapter 21. But now God is a swordsman, not an arsonist, and he's a swordsman. And he's wielding his sword everywhere in Judah and killing everyone just as the fire had destroyed all the trees.

There's totality in the slaughter, and that comes out very vividly at the end of verse 3. I'm coming against you and will draw my sword out of its sheath and will cut off from you, both righteous and wicked. It's going to be so total that not only the bad guys but the good guys are going to be destroyed. And then we prick up our ears and say, oh, we've been reading earlier chapters of the book of Ezekiel, and it said that some are going to be spared.

We had that in chapter 9 and chapter 14. And now you're saying it's going to be everybody. So earlier messages had mentioned the survival of some, and so we have to say that here, the totality is a rhetorical enhancement or embellishment to drive home the overwhelming nature of God's intervention against the homeland in fact 587 because that is what is in mind ultimately.

It would be a second intervention. The Babylonians had invaded in 597 but this would be so much more destructive and disastrous than 597 much more devastating. And so we bring in this notion of totality, but we're not meant to take it absolutely seriously, though it has a rhetorical point.

At the end of this message, in verses 6 and 7, Ezekiel is told engage to engage in a symbolic action of sorts. He's to engage in loud mourning, loud mourning cries. I remember once that in my voluntary work as a chaplain, in fact, I was in a hospital as a patient at the time, and over the corridor, there was an African-American who was dying and he did and his daughter came to see him for the last time in his dead state and she started wailing, wailing and the nurse ushered her out but everybody in the ward was awake by then in the middle of the night.

The Israelite tradition of mourning was very vocal, and it's this vocal aspect that is pointed to here: Verse 6: Moan moans with breaking hearts and bitter grief before their eyes.

And when they say to you, why do you moan? You shall say, because of the news that has come. Every heart will melt, and all hands will be feeble. Every spirit will faint, and all knees will turn to water.

See, it comes and will be fulfilled, says the Lord God. And so, there's this backing up of the straightforward words with this symbolic action of mourning. And he's to say when he's asked what he's doing, this is the proper reaction to this bad news of the message.

He's doing what they all need to be doing. And this point that's made, when the news actually is a reality, every heart will melt, and all hands will be feeble. And this corresponds to the former message to all the faces from south to north being scorched by the fire.

So, there's going to be this. And this, of course, is the reaction of the exiles of 597 to this news when the news comes of 587. So that's the first sword message, which is a revamping of the forest fire message.

But then we come to the second message, which is also a sword message in 5 to 17. There's a grouping together in terms of these key words in this chapter. And here the sword is represented as having an independent life of its own.

It's carefully sharpened and polished by unseen hands so as to be the most efficient weapon it can be against its enemies. Verse 9, a sword, a sword is sharpened. It's also polished.

It's sharpened for slaughter, honed to flash like lightning. And there it is this wonderful, super-efficient sword. But the question arises: Who is it going to be used against? Who are going to be the sword's enemies? And at this point in verse 12, cry and wail, O mortal.

He's to engage in that symbolic action of mourning for it is against my people. It is against all Israel's princes. They're thrown to the sword together with my people.

And there we are. Those are to be the enemies. It's to be against Judah.

And also, he's to strike his thigh at the end of verse 12. Again, this demonstration, this physical demonstration of his grief. The striking of the thigh is a cultural gesture of grief.

And why? Because of the shocking truth that the sword's enemies are none other than gods and people and their government officials, as we saw in verse 12, the princes of Israel. And then, we're moving on in this message. In verse 14, strike hand to hand.

There's to be this hand clap. And here, obviously, it's an expression of grief in the context. But here, no, I don't think it is an expression of grief.

It is elsewhere. Here, it's the signal for the sword to start working. And then, after that hand clap, let the sword fall twice, thrice.

It is a sword for killing, a sword for great slaughter. And we're going to be told that God speaks in verse 17 at the end, I too will strike hand to hand. I will satisfy my fury.

I, the Lord, have spoken. Ezekiel's clapping of his hand. Well, God's going to give his own signal when the time comes.

And, of course, it's referring to the Babylonian invasion of Judah and starting the siege of Jerusalem. And this is going to begin, actually, in 588 and then end, tragically, in 587. But in between, we have this work of the sword in 16.

Attack to the right. Engage to the left. Wherever your edge is directed, this is the call to the sword.

Do your grisly work. So, it's all very frightening. Actually, 8 to 17 is in poetry, as the layout of your English Bible may suggest.

But Ezekiel usually works in prose. And we're going to go back to prose again in 18 through 27, except that 25 to 27 is to be poetry once more. And the next sword message covers 18 to 27.

And it begins with God ordering Ezekiel to carry out a symbolic action. And the explanation of this symbolic action is going to be an interpretation of what the sword is all about. It's about the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar.

It's about his way of making south. But there's a military decision that Nebuchadnezzar has to make. This symbolic action is all about this great decision as to which way country Nebuchadnezzar is to attack first, Ammon or Judah.

And so as to this symbolic action in verse 19, mortal, mark out two roads for the sword of the king of Babylon. There we are. Interpretation for the first time in historical terms.

For the sword of the king of Babylon to come. Both of them shall issue from the same land. And so there is this one road, what we call the Fertile Crescent, coming up from Mesopotamia and going across to Assyria.

And then there's a parting of the ways. You can go different ways. And Nebuchadnezzar seems to be at this point in the mind of God at Damascus.

And he seems to have made his military headquarters at Damascus, but he's going to send his troops to the various countries that are going to be attacked down in the south. Countries that have rebelled against his imperial authority. But there's a choice.

And from Damascus, he can go straight down. And if he goes straight down, he's going to go through Transjordan and end up at Amman. That's the first choice.

And he can focus his attack on the capital of Amman, Rabbah. So that's one choice. But alternatively, he could go down the coast road.

From Damascus, he could go over to the coast and down, following the coastline by the sea road. And then he could turn left off into Judah as he got near the bottom of that coast road. And so that's the choice.

What is he going to do? And Nebuchadnezzar has no idea. No idea. And evidently, his military officers don't know which.

And perhaps they think, well, does it matter? But Nebuchadnezzar wants to do the right thing. And what do you do if you're a foreign king? You consult the gods. And you look for omens.

This is what you have to do. And so you have some diviners among the military staff who will carry out this omen seeking and to be able to interpret properly. And so there it is.

There it is. There's the choice. But going back to the symbolic vision, we've got this journey across the fertile crescent and down to Damascus.

And then the fork in the road comes. And which way is he to go? Make a signpost. Make it for a fork in the road leading to a city.

Verse 20. Mark out the road for the sword to come to Rabbah of the Ammonites or to Judah and to Jerusalem the fortified. For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way at the fork in the two roads.

To use divination. There we are. And so there were various ways of getting at a prediction of which was the right thing to do.

There were these pagan ways to shake the arrows from the quiver and see how they fell out, what direction they fell out. And that could give you a good clue. Or you could consult the teraphim.

There were these images which had a way of telling the truth. Or you could take an animal and cut it up and look at the liver. It is a very fruitful way of finding out what you should do if you inspect the liver.

And there was a whole science of omens as to how you interpreted the liver when it was cut out of an animal. And then you could take lots. You could take lots and have two lots and two stones, one for Jerusalem and one for Amun, shake them up, and see which one came out.

Well, when he did all that, it turned out very definitely to be Jerusalem. That was the answer from the gods. So that was the way it was going to go.

There's this very interesting pagan way of determining how a military campaign should be carried out. The Judean heroes, Judean prisoners of war, wouldn't like this way of speaking. This is odd.

What's he doing? We don't believe in this stuff. What's he going into all this for? But verse 22, into his right hand, comes the lot for Jerusalem. And so that's the answer.

And so, he realizes that in his future, in the military future of his army, there's going to be a siege for Jerusalem to set battering rams, to call out for slaughter, raising the battle cry, set battering rams against the gates, to cast up rams and to build siege towers. Jerusalem had been called the fortified city. It had these wonderful walls, splendid, strong walls.

And so, the only way to get in would be by a siege and eventually to break down with various ways, with these ramps and these siege towers and so on. Now, verse 23 comes to terms with the pagan nature of what's being taught. All this omen-seeking, you know, the prisoners of war would turn up their noses at mention of that and say, aha, there is something going on.

To them, it will seem like a false divination. God is speaking to Ezekiel about the prisoners of war who are going to be listening to this. And he says they won't like this talk.

No, we don't like this way of thinking. They have sworn solemn oaths, but he brings their guilt to remembrance, bringing about their capture. And what really is being said here is that God is supreme over this, and God is working through these omens, and from God ultimately comes this order.

Nebuchadnezzar is really the agent of this coming siege of Jerusalem and it will be because Jerusalem deserves it. So that's where we are. And so, Jerusalem is going to be his first target.

Nebuchadnezzar's mind is made up and there's that terrible truth revealed in advance through Ezekiel. And he's got to send his soldiers down that southwestern road that will take them to Jerusalem. And there's going to be a siege warfare.

Right. But then moving on, in 25 to 27, there's a focusing upon Zedekiah, the king, the head of the government of Judah in Jerusalem. King Zedekiah is singled out and he was the one who would be, in fact, Judah's last king.

The message comes to the prisoners of war: he's going to lose his throne, which means the end of his reign. And even now, through Ezekiel, far away in Babylon, God's orders ring out to strip Zedekiah of his royal power as part of the overthrow of the social order in Judah. As for you, vile, wicked prince of Israel, you whose day has come, the time of final punishment.

Remember how President Truman used to say, the buck stops here. I've got to bear ultimate responsibility for government decisions and the way that the land is governed. And so, the buck stopped at Zedekiah.

So, remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. There's going to be a ruin, ruin, absolute ruin.

Then, the fourth and last sword message occurs in verses 28 to 32, and it draws, actually, on the language of the earlier message. It's like a summary. It has the form of a summary to a large extent.

And so, it presents a climax to the earlier message. It goes back to talking about the sword and it says that eventually Ammon too will be attacked. That after Jerusalem, there will be a going to Rabbah concerning the Ammonites.

And so, this sword, you get the language again, drawn for slaughter, polished to consume, to flash like lightning. But then, and then those whose day has come, the time of final punishment. We just read that about Zedekiah in chapter 25.

And so, the former language is being picked up here. But then there's a surprising development, a surprising development because the sword is given a new order. Return it to its sheath.

Your work is done. Your work is done. Return it to its sheath in the place where you were created, in the land of your origin.

Go back home, sword. Go back home, Babylonians, to the place you came from. I will judge you, and sword equals Babylon.

I will judge you. I will pour out my indignation upon you. With the fire of my wrath, I will blow upon you.

I will deliver you into brutish hands, those skillful to destroy. You shall be fuel for the fire. Oh, my.

It picks up that initial message for the whole section about the fire. You shall be fuel for the fire. Your blood shall enter the earth.

You shall be remembered no more for I, the Lord, have spoken. This is the only place in the book of Ezekiel where we have the final fate of the Babylonians. All the rest is focused on Judah's suffering and then Judah going back to its land, but nothing is said elsewhere.

In Jeremiah, it is. The book of Jeremiah makes much of the final fate of Babylon. In fact, this is a theme in the classical prophets, and it goes back to Isaiah.

And there's a very impressive passage that sets out a double program for Israel's enemies. And you get it in Isaiah chapter 10 and it's in verses 5 through 15. And it's in two parts.

First of all, it's speaking back in Assyria's time. First of all, it says, Assyria, the rod of my anger. God is going to use Assyria against his own people.

Against a godless nation, I send him. Against the people of my wrath, I command him. And this, in the context, is none other than Judah.

To take spoil and seize plunder, to tread them down like mire in the streets. But this is not what he intends. Assyria goes beyond the divine mandate and takes part in destruction, absolute destruction of people and places.

And he boasts of what he can do because his gods are behind him. And says Assyria. And so there's that arrogance there of Assyria.

But then there's a switch, and it comes in verse 12 of Isaiah 10. When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride. Shall the axe vault itself against the one who wields it.

The Assyrian is my agent. And so, he's not to go beyond my will. And so, there's this double program in God's purposes.

First, there is the enemy, a foreign enemy that is to attack Judah. But then God turns his attention to that enemy and the enemy gets punished in turn. And this ultimately of course is a matter of hope for Judah.

And so, this is where we are. This is a sort of rerun of Isaiah 10, chapter 5, verses 5 through 15. But now it's Nebuchadnezzar, and now it's Babylon, the successor of Assyria, which is caught up in this double program.

But there's just a brief mention and it's put in mysterious terms. You don't actually say Babylon. You don't actually say Nebuchadnezzar.

And you go back to this vague talk of the sword. There might be spies. There might be spies ready to report what was being said.

And so, one must be careful. So, use this code word again: the sword. But I was making plain to those who had ears to hear that eventually, the great imperial power of Babylon would fall.

And so, there's a hint of hope there in speaking of the eventual downfall of Judah's enemy. And so there we are. There are these sword passages in this chapter.

We move on to chapter 22. And as I said at the beginning we get behind the punishment of chapter 21 to the reasons for it. After the punishment, you get accusations, which is not a normal order in an oracle of judgment.

But this is the order that is very visibly vividly presented here in moving from 21 to 22. So, it probes into why does this have to happen? Why does this punishment have to happen? And the focus is still on Jerusalem as it had been in the earlier chapter. And there are three messages.

After the initial introductory formula the word of the Lord came to me. You have 2 through 16 and then 18 through 22 and 24 through 31. And this formula of prophetic authority is the preface in each case.

The word of the Lord came to me. We also have a keyword in the first message. It's the word blood.

The word blood runs through it. And it warrants the initial description of Jerusalem in verse 2 as the bloody city. It might be better to adopt the rendering of the NIV.

The city of bloodshed which brings out a bit more vividly what it means. The city of bloodshed. And this message is going to be picking up the word blood all the way through.

Its sidesteps are going to sidestep to a variety of sins that have been committed in Jerusalem, but it keeps coming back to this bloodshed and the wrongful taking of human life. And then another factor that's brought to the fore is the neglect of the traditional obligation not to worship idols. And this is set out at the beginning.

In verse 3, thus says the Lord God, a city shedding blood within itself its time has come making its idols, defiling itself. And so, two items are put there. These two features, holding human life cheap and engaging in image-related worship, have set God's clock ticking toward a time of reckoning.

And so, the time has come. Verse 3. Verse 4. You brought your day near. The appointed time of your years has come.

And so, eventually, there must be punishment for these accusations that are going to be set out, which are summarized at this early point. There's going to be a time of reckoning, and God's going to intervene in a terrible reprisal. In fact, it says in verse 4, therefore, I have made you a disgrace talking to Jerusalem rhetorically, I have made you a disgrace before the nations and a mockery to all the countries looking back at 597, but the implication is that we're moving towards 587 which will be much worse.

Verses 6 through 12 is a roll call of wrongdoing. The royal house, over the generations, has set a bad example to the citizens of Jerusalem. The princes of Israel everyone, according to his power, has been bent on shedding blood, and that practice has been picked up by the citizens.

The government has misused its political power, and commoners, too, have rushed to show their lack of respect for fellow citizens. father and mother are treated with contempt. The alien residing within you suffers extortion, the orphan and widow are wronged in you, and in various ways there's this wrongdoing. You are those who

slander to shed blood and so on in a whole variety of ways, and we get a roll call very close to the priestly list that we've had in chapter 18 earlier on. And then too there was engaging in those pagan feasts eating upon the mountains and at these high places that have been singled out in an earlier chapter.

There was also a lack of respect for God by breaking his sabbaths. There's a mention of the profaning my sabbaths. There were two types of sabbaths, the weekly sabbath and the sabbath in terms of years every seven years, but there'd be no respect for either requirement set out in the Torah.

And then, in verse 13, God responds to all these interpersonal offenses by saying he's clapping his hands, and here now, it is a gesture of protest in the context. And there's a looking ahead to the breakup of the community in 587 a general deportation that Jerusalem citizens were going to suffer after the deporting of the elite in 597. Drastic as it was, and though it would mean the loss of reputation, it would harm the reputation of Israel's God among other nations, it was the only way to deal with the situation.

Verse 16 says I shall be profane through you in the sight of the nations. I'm going to lose my good name, my holy name, my powerful name. By doing so, they'll say, oh, how weak Yahweh was that he couldn't protect his people from the Babylonian gods.

But nevertheless, this is the only way to go, the only way forward. To profane means to treat as common rather than holy, and so to despise. Then, 18 to 22 are dominated by a metaphor drawn from the work of the silversmiths.

And Ezekiel has, in fact, borrowed it from an earlier prophet from the book of Isaiah and chapter 1, where speaking about Jerusalem, it says, Your silver has become dross. Your silver has become dross. Now, Ezekiel was a master of metaphor and a master at developing metaphors and extending them.

And so, he takes up this reference to trying to get silver and the work of the silversmiths. And he's speaking about the raw material of the silversmiths, which was actually lead ore, a mixture of lead and other metals, including silver. And the eventual aim was to get to the silver.

But in the coming day, what we know as 587, the lead ore of Judah, which is what it had degenerated to, was going to be put into the smelting furnace. And Jerusalem would be the smelting furnace. And smelting is here the fire of judgment that Jerusalem was going to endure.

And metaphorically it's describing as subjecting the lead ore to enough heat to melt the silver, to melt that ore and leave behind, to get the silver and leave behind the

dross or other metallic elements. But here, the emphasis is on the smelting process. And there's no thought of that extra step of actually getting to the silver.

And it's the fire of the smelting furnace that comes to the fore here as an end in itself. Then in 24 to 31, we have the third message, which starts by addressing Jerusalem and then describing the failings of the various leadership groupings in Jerusalem. They'd all failed to carry out their proper duties.

And the last verse indicates that this particular message is looking back at 587. Verse 31: Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them, I have consumed them, I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath I have returned their conduct upon their heads. And so, this was, after the event, this was a recapitulation of why it happened, and its certainty for the future in the other messages is secured by saying it did happen, and now we can look at it as a thing of the past.

Chapter 23 is a history lesson, and it's used to tell the message of Judah's sinfulness and Judah's liability for coming punishment in 587. It uses wrong sexuality as a metaphor throughout here, and it employs language that the first heroes, those 597 exiles, would have regarded as unnecessarily coarse and vulgar. We're back in the situation of Chapter 16. Ezekiel is doing it again using these nasty words, these unpleasant words, and oh my, these shocking words, and of course, the intention is to shock the prisoners of war into accepting what they do not want to hear, and so it has to be exaggerated.

It's a way of shouting at a group that wanted to turn a deaf ear and trying to make them listen. I'll shock you into listening, so there. And so, in both respects, Chapter 23 is very much like Chapter 16 when Jerusalem was portrayed as God's unfaithful wife but in 16, that unfaithfulness was mainly religious.

It was set out mainly religious in Chapter 16 with a glance at the political side of their unfaithfulness, but the presentation in Chapter 23 is the other way round, and it stresses the political unfaithfulness in making alliances and treaties with other nations and then the religious unfaithfulness comes in as a side issue, and so there's that contrast there. In some of the prophetic books, political entanglements with other nations are regarded as a sort of alternative faith. Back in Isaiah's time, when Hezekiah tried to make an alliance with Egypt to get the Assyrians off their back, we find the Prophet Isaiah speaking in this way in Chapter 30 in verses 2 and 3. It speaks of, without asking for my counsel, envoys who have been sent to make an alliance to take refuge in the protection of the Pharaoh and seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt.

And those phrases, to take refuge and seek shelter, is part of the vocabulary of faith in the Old Testament, but now this is an alternative faith. Therefore, the protection of Pharaoh shall become your shame and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt your humiliation. And Chapter 31 in verse 1, Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help,

who rely on horses, who trust in chariots and in horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord.

And so this is this old theme among the classical prophets. It's being taken up here. And Hosea did it, too, for the Northern Kingdom. Hosea Chapter 8 and verse 9. They've gone up to Assyria.

Ephraim has bargained for lovers. But here in Hosea, you get this sexual imagery. It's not only wrong and unfaithful, but there's this sort of lovers.

The Assyrians are the new lovers of the Northern Kingdom, for the Northern Kingdom instead of Yahweh himself. And so, there's a mixture of what Isaiah had to say, a tirade against alliances as being unfaithful. And then what Assyria had to say, that there's a sort of sexual metaphor you can use about this unfaithfulness seeking new lovers.

But here, in chapter 23, history was repeating itself. Judah had gotten entangled in these various alliances to get the best possible deal. And especially under Zedekiah, there'd been an appeal to Egypt before and during the siege.

And the Egyptians had come, the Egyptian army had come. The Babylonian army, as told in a verse in Jeremiah, had broken off the siege and moved to the southwest to deal with the Egyptians. And deal with them, they did.

And the Egyptians were forced back. The Babylonians came back and resumed their siege of Jerusalem. So that didn't work in point of fact.

This unfaithfulness against God, from Ezekiel's point of view, didn't work. And Chapter 23 is a literary unit. It's split up into three smaller groups: 2 to 27, 28 to 35, and 36 to 49.

We need, there's this review of ancient history here, a whole history of this political unfaithfulness down the ages. Any powerful nation, the people of God, took the opportunity to make alliances with them to make their lot better. And we need to remember that initially, at an earlier stage for centuries, there had been two kingdoms.

The Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. And this is picked up here. And interestingly enough, these are portrayed as God's two wives.

God has got two wives, which is very striking. But we find it in another prophet too, in Jeremiah 6 through 13. The Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom are God's two wives.

And here they are now. And they've got names, Ohelah and Oholibah. And Ohelah means her tent.

And Oholibah means my tent is in her. And nobody's quite sure as to what the tent refers to. But in the context of marriage, it probably means the marriage tent in which the marriage was consummated.

And even today, you may know, a Jewish couple is married under a canopy, which is a sort of relic of the marriage tent. And so there are these two wives. And they became mine and they bore sons and daughters.

And then you get an identification. Ohelah is Samaria and Oholibah is Jerusalem. Well, actually, this interpretation is taken from the end of the chapter where this is so.

But earlier on, it seems that the nations are in view, the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. And this is speaking nationally rather than in terms of capitals. But there's this playing the whore when she's mine.

First, it was the Northern Kingdom that was involved with the Assyrians. And then we've got this awful talk of these sexual affairs. And how beautiful how Israel fell for these Assyrians.

And how handsome they were in their military uniforms. And it's all very, very shocking. And then we come in verse 11.

So, Oholibah, Judah in the south. Then, the same thing happened with the Assyrians and then with the Chaldeans or Babylonians. And these love affairs are carried on.

So, this is the way that it's talking. A shocking way to represent the political unfaithfulness of not only the Northern Kingdom, which the Judeans would readily agree with perhaps, but even the Southern Kingdom. And so, Judah was just as bad in point of fact.

So, 5 to 10 is a summary of the history of the Northern Kingdom under Assyrian domination in the 8th century BC. And as we saw, Hosea saw what was going on. And he called the Assyrians the lovers of the Northern Kingdom.

And so, this is being picked up here. From 11 to 21, Ezekiel turns to the subsequent history of Judah. Politically involved first with Assyria and then with Babylon.

And now flirting with Egypt. And so, it's come into contemporary times now under Zedekiah. And this reenacting of ancient history.

This big no-no of what was unfaithfulness against God in a political way. And so, verses 11 to 21 against Judah, it's really an accusation. And so, it's not surprising that in verse 22, we have that word, therefore, which is a bridging word very often between accusation and punishment.

Therefore, I will arouse against you, your lovers. They're going to turn against you. And they're going to be your destruction.

Those you've made alliances with. All right. And God was going to use the Babylonians eventually as agents of his own punishment.

There's a little clause in verse 24. I will commit the judgment to them. I will commit the judgment to them.

And they shall judge you according to their ordinances, which may very well be more cruel than any ordinances you have been used to. Then, 28 to 35 serves to reflect on these coming experiences. And if you glance through in the middle, you've got a poem, a little poem in 32 to 34.

But on either side, you've got prose. So you have a prose passage from 28 to 31. Then this poem in 32 to 34.

And then, finally, a little bit of prose in verse 35. And so that's the sort of literary structure there with the difference between prose and poetry. But when you come to the poetry, you bring in a new metaphor.

We find a new metaphor. And this is the cup of judgment. The cup of judgment.

And 32, you should drink your sister's cup. Just as the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians. So, you were finally going to fall to the Babylonians, your former lovers with whom you were glad to make a treaty.

You should drink your sister's cup. You should be scorned and derided. It's deep and wide and it holds so much.

You should be filled with drunkenness and sorrow. A cup of horror and desolation is the cup of your sister Samaria. And at this point, the sister is described as Samaria.

And that was the capital of the Northern Kingdom. And that was what was put back at the end of verse 4. And so, there's this intoxicating cup, this very strong liquor. And Judah is going to be knocked out by it and destroyed by it.

And that's the very fateful new metaphor. The prophets use it a fair number of times. And then, of course, it gets carried over, we may remember, into the New Testament, that cup of judgment.

Jesus said, can you drink the cup that I am going to drink, referring back to this very metaphor. Then, the last message, in verses 36 to 49, returns to the two sisters. And there's renewed accusation in 36 to 45, now for religious unfaithfulness to God, especially child sacrifice in 36 and 39, and then for political unfaithfulness in 40 to 44.

Then, a prediction of punishment comes last in 46 to 49. And this would mean the death. The sisters were going to be put to death with their families and the destruction of their homes.

And this was the only way that God's people could come to appreciate the reality and nature of their God. Notice the very last clause in verse 49. And you shall know that I am the Lord.

There was no easier way of God teaching the lesson of what it meant, what it should mean to be a faithful follower of Yahweh. Next time we should be looking at chapter 24.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 11, God's sword against sinful Jerusalem and Judah. Ezekiel chapter 20:45-23:49.