

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 18, Israel's Renewal, Ezekiel 36 :16-38

© 2024 Leslie Allen and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 18, Israel's Renewal. Ezekiel 36:16-38.

We come now in our study of the book to chapter 36, verses 16 through 38, and I think of this as Israel's renewal. In verse 16, we read, The word of the Lord came to me. And this, of course, is the normal formula that we have for receiving a new revelation, and it introduces a new literary unit.

And this passage of 16 through 38 lies at the heart of the positive teaching of the book. Glancing over it, we can see the general structure. The message starts in verse 17, and there's a private message moving on to verse 21, which is for Ezekiel's ears alone.

Then, verses 22 through 38 present a public message to be passed on to the exiles. This public message falls into three separate parts, each introduced by the quotation formula, Thus says the Lord God. Those parts are verses 22 through 32, 33 through 36, and 37 and 38.

The private message to Ezekiel, in verses 17 through 21, is very important because it lays out two problems that need to be resolved. And then the public message, in verses 22 to 38, will show just how God is going to resolve those two problems. The first problem concerns God's people, and the second problem concerns God himself.

And the problems were both complicating factors that cried out for resolution, as one thinks of the people of God going back to the land from their exile. The first problem is set out in verses 17 to 19, and the second one in verses 20 through 21. Let's read them both.

Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds. Their conduct, in my sight, was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period. So, I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land and for the idols with which they defiled it.

I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed among the countries. In accordance with their conduct and their deeds, I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, these are the people of the Lord.

And yet they had to go out of his land. But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. God shares both these problems with Ezekiel in this private message, and as I say, this is going to be the background to the public message in the rest of the passage.

The first issue is one we have often heard of in the first half of the book, the sinfulness of the people. It's a theme that we also read a lot about in the other Old Testament prophets and in the epic history of Israel's life in the land in Joshua through Kings. That history was a history of failure, a history of Israel not living up to God's expectations.

And here, that sinfulness is presented metaphorically as ritual uncleanness that debarred the people from worshipping in God's presence. It was language that Ezekiel, the priest, understood very well, and its use here reminds us that Ezekiel had trained as a priest before he became a prophet. Then, a cultural example is given at the end of verse 17 in terms of a woman in her menstrual period who was regarded as unclean, and it ruled out sexual intercourse with her partner until it was over.

And there's a crucial priestly text, Leviticus 15, 19-31, that lays out the ritual contamination that menstruation caused. It was part of the uncleanness that could happen. It made her unclean, and potentially, it made her sexual partner unclean, too.

And so, there's this metaphor of uncleanness. The trouble was that this uncleanness would occur if either of those went to the temple, and then the temple would be defiled. And this is brought out in Leviticus 15 in verse 31.

Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle in their midst. The sanctuary could get defiled, the people could die, a whole train of problems. But it was very important, as this issue of sin resulted in uncleanness.

Here, the uncleanness of this menstrual woman is used as a metaphor for the blatant sinfulness of God's people and their failure to live up to God's standards for them. And so, God's judgment took the form of expulsion from the land. In Old Testament thinking, the land was very important.

It was the thermometer of the relationship between God and Israel. A good relationship meant good crops and a good life generally in the land. But a bad relationship between the people and God meant famine and a general breakdown of land-related routines.

The ultimate measure of a bad relationship with God was the complete rupture of living in the land, in fact, expulsion from the land. This healthy triangle of God,

people, and land had now been shattered as the people were in exile as a result of their sinfulness. Loss of the homeland resulted in exile and dispersion to other countries.

So, verse 19 ends as verse 17 had begun, relating to the basic problem of Israel's conduct and deeds—obviously bad conduct and bad deeds—which is the reason for exile. That was Israel's problem that God had earlier to deal with by exile. And we shall see, this is going to raise a problem when you think of returning to the land.

How do you know it's not all going to happen again? It's the same sequence. This is going to be the first problem. They were sinful then.

Isn't it going to be true as they return to the land? The same people, the same people. Verses 20 through 21 present a second problem, now God's own problem, God's personal problem that arose from his solution to the first one by means of exile. In the ancient Near East, religion was essentially territorial.

You lived in a land, and you worshipped the God of the land, who was now your God, your special God. Non-Israelites, when they looked at the exile, knew what it meant, or they thought they knew what it meant. The loss of the land was a sign of the weakness of Israel's God.

And it was a sign of the conquering power of Marduk, the chief national God of the Babylonians. Of course, the Old Testament explained it differently in terms of Israel's God acting providentially and using the Babylonians as agents of his judgment. But that was a very sophisticated theological explanation that wouldn't have occurred to other nations.

Anyway, Yahweh's reputation suffered in expelling the people from the land. And as verses 20 and 21 put it, God's holy name was profaned. These are the people of the Lord, yet they had to go out of his land.

Not much of a God then, was he? Not very powerful, was he? He had to give up the land, and another God took over as more powerful than he was. And so, in terms of the culture, international culture of those times, Yahweh had lost out. And so, this is the second problem here.

And God's name, or his reputation, had been treated as common. The name had been profaned. Profane is to treat as common, with no respect for the special sanctity associated with Israel's God.

And so this is the second problem—a problem caused by the exile. The exile was a neat solution to the first problem, but it raised another problem.

This second problem was caused by the exile, and it remains for God to deal with it in a satisfactory way. This is not the first time that the issue of the profaning of God's name has cropped up in the book of Ezekiel. In chapter 20, it was a factor that stopped God from acting in judgment as the people sinned in Egypt.

Israel's idolatry in Egypt warranted punishment against his people, but that would have been misunderstood by the Egyptians. And, oh, they're suffering. Well, their God isn't looking after them then, is he? And so there was that problem there.

In the wilderness, with the first generation, God didn't punish them as they deserved, for the sake of his name, for the sake of his holy name. And also, where the second generation was concerned, in chapter 20, for the sake of God's name, he didn't punish that second-generation there and then, but there was that prospect of future judgment, which Ezekiel interpreted in terms of exile. And so, in chapter 20, we've had a dwelling of this profaning of God's name as a regular problem in the Exodus, or in the history before the Exodus and in the wilderness time, and there it is.

Now, this uncleanness and this profaning were very important issues in the ritual of ancient Israel. Leviticus 10:10 says that one duty of the priests in teaching the people the meaning of the Torah was, you are to distinguish between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean. And, of course, the clean and unclean Israel had messed that up in their general sinfulness that had resulted in the exile, but this holy and common, this holy and profane, the result was that for God himself, there'd been a mix-up there, and God's holy name had been profaned.

And so, this is standing out, over against what should be these problems, the profaning of God's holy name and the uncleanness of Israel as a reference to their sinfulness. And so, with this second problem, there was this misrepresentation in the nation's eyes. So, the name Yahweh was not regarded as having special sanctity.

He was a minor God, worshipped by a conquered nation. And so, Israel had dragged its God down with it. This was the problem.

The public message that Ezekiel is told to give, in verse 22 following, opens with God's resolution of this second problem. It was the more important problem, really, God's own problem, more important than the second problem, so that's going to be put second. The answer was that God was going to end Israel's exile and take his people back to their homeland in a new exodus and that display of power would prove his special sanctity to the other nations.

And this is brought out in verses 22 through 24. Therefore, say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations

to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations and which you have profaned among them.

And the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. And this was going to be the answer to the second problem, that great demonstration of power. God is powerful enough to take the people back to the promised land.

This is the thought here. In an earlier lecture, we mentioned Psalm 126 and verse 2 in this connection. And there it was said, then it was said among the nations, The Lord Yahweh has done great things for them. And there, at last, was this admission: God has got his reputation back, and it is no longer tarnished.

And so, the exile was over, in the return from exile. This was the restoration, not the profaning of God's holy name, but the sanctifying of God's name in fact. And so, the motivation, it's plainly said in verse 22, if I'd been one of the exiles, I wouldn't like to have heard this: the motivation for God's restoration of Israel was only the problem of his profane name.

Israel had no inherent claim; there was nothing about the exiles that persuaded him to act on their behalf; they were a rotten lot. And God had been quite fair in depriving them of the land. No, his own honor was at stake. That was why there had to be an end to exile.

The ending of exile was a theological necessity to clear his tarnished name. And, of course, that was what guaranteed, if you think it through, this promise guarantees the coming return from exile. So, the exiles could be sure it would happen, but nothing to do with you, nothing attractive about you that I want to bring you back.

But it's my problem that's being resolved here. And so, it was sheer grace, the salvation that God was going to bring about for them. An interesting phenomenon is that this is not only an Old Testament concern, but in the New Testament, at a very important place, this issue about God's name and honor is raised again.

And I'm thinking of Matthew chapter 6 and verse 9, the beginning of that prayer that the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples to say. And pride of place was given in that prayer to the petition, hallowed be your name. In other words, may your name be regarded as special and holy rather than being profaned.

The petition harks back to Ezekiel 36 and verse 23: I will sanctify my great name in this wonderful event of bringing my people back from exile. And then the nation shall know that I am the Lord. And then, of course, the Lord's prayer continues: May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And so all of the first part of the Lord's prayer is taking its cue from this problem of the profaning of God's name and over against that new evidence of the sanctifying of God's name. And in my mind, I think this first part of the Lord's prayer is a great event comparable to Israel's return from exile. In fact, to the second coming of Christ, when full salvation will be achieved, God's kingdom will fully come on earth, and God's will be fully done.

Then, and then only, the will of God will be universally honored in the special way it should be. And that hope is the basis of the church's mission in life. And Jesus told his followers constantly to pray for that hope to be realized in the beginning of that prayer.

Verses 25 to 28 can now come to what the first problem set out in the earlier part of our section, in private messages 17 through 19. And the implicit reason was the great risk that God was taking in letting his people go back to the homeland. Were not God and Israel walking back into the same problem that had bedeviled the earlier occupation of the promised land? Would there not be that sinfulness and uncleanness? Would there not be that gross sinning happening all over again? Were there any guarantees that it wouldn't be like that again? And so, it could be the same issue, the same issue over again.

But God has an answer to the potential resurgence of the old problem. If the second problem needed an external answer, that objective demonstration of God's power by the return from exile, well, the first problem needed an internal answer. And in fact more than one, but essentially an internal answer.

That something had to be done internally about the people of Israel. And so, first of all, he would give his people a fresh start by forgiving them, by wiping the slate clean. And here in verse 25, I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

So, first of all, there was to be a forgiveness of past sins. This is what this is speaking of. The sprinkling of clean water is a metaphorical counterpart to uncleanness as a picture of sinning.

Numbers 19, verse 13 mentions water for cleansing as the cure for uncleanness. And this is used as a metaphor here, as it is, you may remember, in Psalm 51 and verse 7. That, too, reflects a metaphorical use for forgiveness. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

The washing of God, letting bygones be bygones. But more than that was needed. To be forgiven is one thing, but how about afterward? Might there not be a slipping back into those same old sins and history repeating itself? And so there had to be

another aspect of this internalization of God's work in where the people of God was concerned.

First of all, that relationship, so their uncleanness was a thing of the past, and you're forgiven, you've got a fresh start. But then, moving on, there needed to be something else. And this is verses 26 and 27.

A new heart I will give you, a new spirit I will put within you, I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. This was a very special promise, and we remember the book of Ezekiel, who couldn't resist putting it back into chapter 11 and putting it back into that second edition of the book that related to a situation after 587. 11:19 and 20, I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them.

And so, the book of Ezekiel, I have to say it twice, it was so wonderful this promise that was being made here. There was going to be a new, ongoing sensitivity to God's will. Forgiveness by itself was not sufficient.

There was to be a new sensitivity to God's will by this heart of soft flesh in place of their stony, hard-heartedness towards God that they had been exerting before the exile. And this new spirit would be an expression of God's own spirit conforming to his will. Because a new spirit is interpreted in verse 27 as my spirit, I will put my spirit within you.

And so there was to be this sharing of God's will where the people of God were concerned. And so not only would the old triangle of God, people, and land be true again, but the old covenant ideal, the two-sided formula, you shall be my people, and I will be your God. This can be a reality.

And this is what's said at the end of verse 28: going back to return to the land, you shall be my people, and I will be your God. That covenant relationship will come to a perfect fulfillment, a perfect reality. We were saying just now that the New Testament picked up verse 23 in the Lord's Prayer.

And we wouldn't be surprised to learn that it also made good use of verses 25 to 26. And in fact, it's in John chapter 3, John's Gospel chapter 3, in that interview that Jesus had with Nicodemus, that there's a revisiting of what was being said here in Ezekiel 30. Verse 5, very, very truly I tell you, no one can enter into the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.

That was what Jesus told Nicodemus. Well, the mention of new birth marks the launching of the eternal life that John 3 is going to go on to talk about. But then, to be born of water, the inauguration of the new life is water.

Of course, this takes us back to verse 25 of verse 36, God's cleansing work of forgiveness. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. And so there we are, that basic work of forgiveness. That's the fresh start that God provides.

The second part is to be born of the spirit, to be equipped with the new spirit, God's spirit, which is in line with what Ezekiel 36 goes on to say. There are two aspects of this new life, beginning with forgiveness and then the gift of the spirit, which enables God's will to be fulfilled. And Jesus, you may remember in John 3, says don't you recognize this? He's saying haven't you read Ezekiel 36 lately? You should know these things.

And you've got to realize that it's coming true through my teaching and my own work. Verses 29 through 30 are the next part of this message. 29 I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you.

I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant so that they may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. First of all, in 29, there's this summary of that double answer of verses 25 to 28. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, both by that initial forgiveness I was talking about and by that ongoing provision of this new spirit, in fact, my spirit, says God.

But there was another thing that had to be dealt with because we didn't dwell on the fact that in verse 18, the sinfulness of the people of God had defiled the land. The land had been defiled there in verse 18 by Israel's sinning. And so, Israel's salvation needed to be extended to the land.

There had to be a renewal of the land having been defiled and brought down. So, salvation is extended to the land in a new fertility. In fact, not only would famine be a thing of the past, but also the psychological loss of esteem that went with Israel's view of itself would go.

So that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among where the nations are concerned. Verses 31 and 32 bring us to the last part of this overall message, and the section ends on a challenging note in 31 and 32.

Then you shall remember your evil ways and your dealings that were not good, and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not

for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God, let that be known to you. Nothing good about you that attracted me that said I want to take them back from exile.

They are good folk, no. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel. And we're coming back to what has been a theme in the book of Ezekiel.

There were never to forget their sinful past and always to regret it. Never to forget but always to regret it. And that was to be a healthy thing here.

And we had that in chapter 6. We had it again in chapter 16. We had it once more in chapter 20. And here, this is stressed once more.

That regret could be a powerful motivation to never walk down that wrong path again. See where it ended up. And so, I must not do it.

In an earlier lecture, we said that Paul always remembered he was the chief of sinners. He never allowed himself to forget that, which reflected the tremendous grace of God in his own life.

And then 32 begins with a reminder of what had been said earlier on in verse 22. That Israel had no virtue of their own that might have attracted God and encouraged him to give them another chance. No, the opposite was true.

Their ways were only the iniquities and abominable deeds mentioned in verse 31. The rottenness that could have made God give up on them apart from sheer grace. Free and undeserved grace.

But there was that other factor, the profaning of God's name, that made God do it. Interestingly enough, there's a parallel passage of sorts in the book of Isaiah, verses 43 and 25.

Which brings out this same motif. I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins. And so, for my own sake.

This takes us right back to what Ezekiel had to say about the sanctifying of God's holy name that had been profaned. That was the motivation, in fact, for the forgiveness in Isaiah 43 and verse 25. And then we move on to 33 and 36.

We're getting very near the end then. And that explores further the transformation that is going to take place in the land. When it's no longer defiled and degraded by the people sinning.

33 through 36. Thus says the Lord God, on the day when I cleanse you from all your iniquities by that double remedy. I will cause the towns to be inhabited and the waste places to be rebuilt.

The land that was desolate shall be tilled instead of being the desolation that was in the sight of all who pass by. They will say that this desolate land has become like the Garden of Eden. And the waste and desolate ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.

Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I the Lord have rebuilt the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate. I the Lord have spoken and I will do it. And this next section thinks again of the transformation that's going to take place in the land when it's no longer defiled as it had been.

And there's a hint that this transformation will help the second problem of the overall passage. The dishonoring of God's name and there'll be a recognition of God. The nations will get the message that Yahweh is the great transformer.

And no longer will there be projected the image of a minor, weak God. 37 through 38 continues the theme of transformation. But it also answers a separate pastoral problem that the exiles evidently had.

If we think back to England after the First World War, there was great distress over the terrible loss of life. So many young men had died in that slaughter. And this seems to have been a worry on the minds of the exiles.

We've lost so many people. This is a great worry for us. Ezekiel 12:16 had predicted a few would escape from the sword, famine, and pestilence.

And so it was, but they seemed to be a much smaller crowd than ever they had been. And that was associated with the Babylonian campaign against Judah and Jerusalem. Now, God declares himself open to prayers for the exiles to grow in numbers after they've returned.

Towns in the homeland that are now ruined would eventually team with people. I will also let the House of Israel ask me to do this for them. To increase their population like a flock.

Like a flock for sacrifices. Like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed festivals. So shall the ruined towns be filled with flocks of people.

Then they shall know that I am they, the Lord. And so, God is sensitive to this problem that the people are feeling. They've lost so many of their population.

And so, a metaphor is used from festival times in pre-exilic Jerusalem. And the exiles could think back and remember what it was like at festival time. Flocks of sheep would be available in great numbers for sacrifices to be offered by the pilgrims.

This was a memory that the priest prophet Ezekiel had, and very many of the exiles must have held dear. It was part of the normality of pre-exilic Jerusalem.

Well, here it's made a metaphor for the great increase in population for Israel. And so, at the end, then they shall know that I am the Lord. Finally, when life rises again from the ruins, the exiles would be assured of the reality of their great God.

Next time, we will be going to chapter 37 of the book.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 18, Israel's Renewal. Ezekiel 36:16-38.