

The Man with the Inkhorn!

Reflections on Ezekiel 9

Ezekiel is one of three prophet-priests in the Old Testament, Jeremiah and Zechariah being the other two. Of these three Ezekiel (born 662 BC) is probably best known for his obscurity! A paradox indeed, but to the average reader of Scripture his prophecies are a maze of incoherent visions. As one has written, Ezekiel is 'a kaleidoscope of whirling wheels and dry bones that defy interpretation.' This impression may cause readers to shy away from becoming acquainted with the book and so miss one of the great portions of God's word. His imagery seems over-elaborate, his symbolism makes his book a veritable enigma. It can only be comprehended and appreciated by the reverent reader of scripture who is indwelt by the Spirit of truth, yet he must apply himself to diligent spiritual study and greater familiarisation of the language of Holy Scripture in order to search out the wealth contained in this mine.

There are two sets of three chapters in the Scriptures which are keys to the study of Scripture as a whole. The first three are historic forecasts: Leviticus 23 (7 feasts), Matthew 13 (7 parables of the kingdom), Revelation 2 and 3 (7 churches). The second three are the three 9th chapters that are confessions of godly men, namely Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9. To this I should like to add a fourth – Ezekiel 9. This is a chapter full of interest and relevance for today. In a time of general moral and spiritual rebellion, God will not be thwarted in His purposes of government. The previous chapter reveals to Ezekiel that idolatry of the grossest kind was the fixed intention of the people, and it permeated even to the centre of worship, God's house, the temple. Hence God was determined that the testimony to His Name should be purged of this virus of corruption, violence and false worship. This is the background to the chapter we are to consider.

The Prophecy of Ezekiel opens with that most impressive of chapters unfolding the revelation of the grand and integrated purposes of God. The succeeding chapters are, for many, a closed book, then with chapter 33 to the end (ch. 48) a final and better known section concludes his writing and declares God's future plans for Israel. I propose in this study to focus on one chapter: its message should not lie buried, unheeded by the modern Christian believer.

Ezekiel's ninth chapter is one full of interest and relevance for today. I hope that you will want to look further into its setting, and that you will also consider becoming familiar with Ezekiel as a whole. Comparisons with Daniel 9, Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 will result in fruitful meditations which should profit the earnest soul at this time. Its message strikes me as pivotal. God's ripening purposes of government will not be thwarted by man's rebelliousness and moral turpitude. Holiness becomes God's house forever and His kingdom and dominical rights over His own will be established in righteousness. Then and only then will grace and mercy flow in abundance to those who look to Him and tremble at His word.

In chapter 8 idolatry of a gross kind was the fixed intention of the people living in the holy city of Jerusalem. All through that chapter we are shown one abomination after another. The Lord shows to His servant Ezekiel that the temple is the high court of wickedness. What can be done? What must be done?

The worship of the sun by the elders and weeping for Tammuz {*the lover of Venus of pagan idolatry*} by the women brought God's fixed determination to execute unsparing judgement against their corruption and violence. To do so was essential to satisfy the righteous claims of a holy God. It was also imperative that the testimony to His name be purged of the virus of rebellious false worship that, unchecked, was potent to destroy any testimony to the truth of God in this world. Such was the background crisis to the chapter to be considered.

Verse 1:

Ezekiel had sought to walk with God and serve Him in difficult days. He is now admitted into the privilege of being told what the Lord is about to do and of being the messenger and recorder of God's intentions. The 9th chapter opens with God crying to the responsible representatives, heavenly watchmen, over the city of Jerusalem to draw near. He is deeply and supremely moved by the condition of His people, and in particular Jerusalem. Are our hearts moved about the spiritual state around us and among those who profess identification with the divine centre? The psalmist

desired to have Jerusalem always before him (Psalm 137:5,6).

It is a common enough feature in the Bible to see angels at work in executing a discriminatory judgement on behalf of God. Reference to Matthew 13:41, 16:27 and 2 Thess. 1:7-8 will show this clearly. As you go through the book of Revelation you will see angels serve in this way constantly. The angels here are spoken of as six men. Each is to have a slaughter weapon¹ in his hand. The historical agents of this judgement would be the coming Chaldeans, but the prophecy is presented in such a way for the reader to regard the calamity coming directly from God. How solemn it is when God sets His face against the place where His name dwelt.

A modern example of this is when Paris, capital of a professing Christian country, celebrated with thousands of its inhabitants the worship of the sun and nature – three months later the 1939-1945 war broke out and Paris was overrun by a terrible scourge. Even today ‘God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap’ (Gal. 6:7).

Verse 2:

The angelic watchmen approach by the upper northern gate of the temple² to take their place before Jehovah. In this verse a man with a writer’s inkhorn, who is also an angel, is introduced. Perhaps he is a seventh angel but to some commentators he is one of the six. He is clothed in linen *byssus*,³ which may be compared to the robe worn by the priest on the great day of Atonement in Leviticus 16:4, 23. His existence reminds me that amidst judgement God will remember mercy. This is wonderful grace being displayed alongside of holiness. There is here an angelic ministry to the heirs of salvation. You should notice the fact that the brazen altar, the place of the judgement on earth is mentioned. For the Christian we have nothing to do with wrath for our Substitute has borne all the judgement of a sin-hating God, but it is in the light of the work of the Lord Jesus upon the cross that the whole world is to be judged.

The angels wait before they execute holy and righteous judgement. Grace stayed the blow of Divine indignation until those who had separated themselves from evil could be manifested and identified.

Verse 3:

The glory is departing, its first step to go is made. It was on the threshold, an ‘Ichabod’ in the making (1

¹ A smashing tool or club

² Also mentioned in chapter 8:3 & 5

³ Students of Scripture may wish to consider a comparison with Daniel 10:5,6

Sam. 4:21). God cannot dwell where His character is compromised and His glory is given to another. His honour will not dwell where He is dishonoured. Yet it is as if God is reluctant to leave, even if there is so much that dishonours Him there. How He longs for His people to be in right relation with Himself and to enjoy fellowship. ‘How can I give thee up? ... my repentings are kindled.’ (Hosea 11:8). It is as if God tarries, and sends His messenger off to see how many there might be in that city who love Him and care for His interests.

Verse 4:

What would be the best thing for the faithful to do in order to give them a distinguishing feature? It was not simply to be that they had not done the same as the others, nor that they had devised a plan of action to counter the evil, nor even that they had exerted all influence and done their utmost against idolatry. It was their sighing and weeping for the abominations which was to be owned and marked by God. I am sure that some speak about the carnality and failure, the worldliness and departure, the compromise and the inconsistency in the Great House, but how many will weep over it? There is no room for a censorious spirit; I must intercede if there is any affection for Christ and His assembly.

In Egypt a distinctive mark had been made upon the dwellings of the children of Israel. Now a mark was made on the foreheads⁴—the sign, or seal, of God upon those of spiritual intelligence. The word ‘mark in our translation is ‘*tau*’ (T) in the original, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. I am informed that in the ancient Hebrew script of Ezekiel’s time, this letter had the shape of a cross or a ‘T’, a mark akin to an ‘x’ as a substitute for the full signature. How little the prophet would have known of the significance of what he records here for our learning. Is it not our privilege to be identified with the Man of sorrows and to share in His rejection? Those thus identified may be an unseen company of little account in this world, but ‘The Lord knoweth them that are His’ (2 Tim. 2:19), and it is He that delights to record the names of those who honour His name.

The people whom God approves of in these dreadful circumstances are not known for their bright and cheerful countenance. They are characterised by the chastening solemnity of the day in which serious departure and indifference to God’s holiness is prevalent. There is no room for pride, only self-judgement in the light of God’s word. ‘For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged’ (1 Cor. 11:31). Are we sufficiently clear of the desolations around us? Only then will there be a proper display of the broken spirit which has great value in God’s sight.

It must have given joy to God’s heart that here were some whose hearts were in sympathy with the heart of

⁴There is a striking resemblance to Rev. 7: 1-4 (cf. 20:4)

Jehovah the God of Israel. The sighing and weeping of the few of the godly remnant meant much to God. They wept over what caused Him so much grief. He was prepared to identify them in His own special way. The Lord Jesus would weep over the same city some 600 years later. 'And when He was come near, He beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee around, and keep thee in on every side' (Luke 19:41-43). The fact that there were some who could be marked off as having the same mind as the Lord Himself was clearly delight for the Spirit of God, even if the mass of the people were the subjects of extreme wrath and repulsion.

Verse 5:

God's stern justice demands absolute punishment and retribution. The angels must smite without mercy. How this necessary command must have grieved God's heart, Who does not desire the death of a sinner. But as the righteous Judge, He will not have the righteous die with the wicked. Judgement is always discriminating. The godly ones are made known and will be spared. The church knows this in regard to the blessed hope, she will be kept from the hour of temptation which will come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon earth (Rev 3:10).

Verse 6:

Light and privilege are always considered in His judgements. The ancients who have privilege also bear deepest responsibility. Their years do not exempt them, but rather their stain is of deeper hue. They began at the ancient men—fullest responsibility with those who should be examples and should have the duty of moral leadership among God's people. The evil had spread from the top downwards, therefore the judgment would follow the same course. God deals with the matter near to Him first: 'Begin at *my* sanctuary.'⁵ How God felt this matter, how it touched His heart. His house was defiled by idolatrous abominations (Ezek. 5:11). In 1 Peter 4:17 we have the New Testament, Christian counterpart of this. 'For the time is come that judgement must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God?' What is nearest to God bears the deepest responsibility. If we profess to be gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus we certainly cannot allow any fellowship with what is contrary to the holiness of that Name or what blasphemes it.

Verse 7:

⁵ cf. 2 Chronicles 36:17-19

Even the house of God was to be defiled. Death is the greatest defiler of all. In a day yet future to Ezekiel the land would be defiled by the blood of Christ and it is only when the fountain for uncleanness is opened and their sin taken away in a day (Zech. 13) that Palestine will be called holy. It is a misnomer to call it the Holy Land today and an (unintentional) insult to the Lord. But for the present the land is defiled by His murder.

Verse 8:

Ezekiel the priest cries out on behalf of the residue, the remnant, the few reserved survivors of a great people (cf. 11:13). He was a man of compassion who cared for the nation, for God's people and is also horrified that God's sanctuary is defiled. He was very concerned and fell on his face but, alas, the nation's sin had progressed too far to avert disaster. The people had had adequate time to repent and flee idolatry but they used the time to multiply their perversity. The urgent cry to the Lord God shows that Ezekiel was in communion not only with the remnant but also with God.⁶ The grief and horror of the moment was also to be found in God's heart.

Verse 9:

The exceeding sinfulness of sin is brought out by God's reply. How little we understand how great an affront sin is to God. Men would learn that sin cannot be done secretly nor unnoticed. God is there and views all, especially having regard to what bears His name. Men may think they can get away with profanity or murder, but God's eye sees all man's perversity and wickedness.

Verse 10:

The holiness of God is unsparing of the sinner still in His sin. It is truly a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. 'For our God is a consuming fire' (Heb. 12:29). The people would receive the due reward for their sins. Now no intercessor's voice is heard. How unspeakably solemn!

Verse 11:

As another has written, 'The awful scene is made more impressive still by the report of the task completed.' 'I have done as thou hast commanded me.' The command to slay was to be literally done. It was not to be 'spiritually fulfilled.' Men will be obliged to sit up when God begins His strange work (Isa. 28:21), but then it will be too late. What a shock to the ungodly sinners. The man clothed in linen, a symbol of Divine righteousness, as opposed to our righteousnesses which

⁶ cf. other examples of intercession Gen. 18:20-33, Amos 7:1-9

are portrayed as filthy rags, completes his assignment. He is the ready and obedient servant of God. He and his companions exercise no personal mitigating sympathies or sentiments. As servants of righteousness they obey. Those who were marked as sighing for the abominations done in the land were spared, and this was undoubtedly a consolation to Ezekiel, but the unrighteous majority would be killed by the coming Chaldean invasion. The details of this section are important because they enable Bible readers to understand why conflict and death are often described in the Old Testament. We see that they were only the consequences of grave evil against God and man. I am reminded of what we have in 1 Corinthians 10:5 where it reads; 'Yet God was not pleased with the most of them' (JND). Representing the majority of anything in a fallen world is not a guarantee that you are doing right.

What can be summarised for our instruction from this chapter? We should not forget that in these dark days in which Christendom is increasingly following the

doctrines of demons that God has a remnant which sigh and mourn over the state of things. Low conditions in the Christian testimony should serve to bring to light faithful men and women. Circumstances bring out what is in a man. It is not the time for luke-warmness and self-seeking but rather for zeal and devotedness to Christ.

We may not see all whom God would identify with His token of approval, but they are all known to the Lord and all esteemed very highly for their labour of love to His name. They may be few but they are not solitary. As long as the Lord has not come to take us to the Father's house it will be possible to have fellowship with those of like precious faith. He has promised that even if the testimony is at the lowest required number to give a witness, He would be present in the midst of them. His word also gives clear indications that we can 'follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart' (2 Tim 2:22) right up until He comes again for His church.

Boeken om de Bijbel 2009

