

## Ezekiel Chapters 19 and 20 – John Karmelich

1. My title for this lesson is, "Understanding the point of no return". There is a principal in the bible where a person can get so bad from God's perspective where if one rejects God for "so long", He makes it more difficult to turn back to Him and eventually one gets to a point where God's condemning judgment has to come and there is nothing we can do to avoid that judgment.
  - a) Three times in Romans Chapter 1, Paul said that God "gave them over". (See Romans 1:24, 1:26 and 1:28). God is saying in effect, "OK, that's the way you want to live? Are you sure? Do you still want to do that sin? OK, fine I'll change your heart so you really want to go that route!" The point is God can make it more difficult to change for the better.
  - b) We as humans are never privileged to know when that point of no return is for any human being. We can only judge behavior. We can still pray for anyone. Still, understand that principal does exist. I'll discuss it more through the lesson.
  - c) The Jewish nation, collectively have reached a point of no return. Chapter 19 is a "dirge" for the end of that nation and Chapter 20 is God explaining why it is so. This does not mean God is done with Israel as a nation. It means the planned punishment of "banishment from the promised land" is now a done deal and cannot be changed.
2. Much of what we have read so far in Ezekiel is about "the coming destruction". We've had chapters explaining why they are guilty. We've had chapters explaining the possible excuses the Israelites could give and why their excuses won't "cut it" with God.
  - a) At this point, God sort of sums up His frustration with the Jewish People. Chapter 19 is a "dirge" over the coming fall of the nation. (Think of a song written for a funeral and you get the idea of a "dirge".) Chapter 20 is fairly long, but it is mostly God reciting the history of the nation of Israel up to this point and it is one big speech on why this punishment is necessary and why it is too late to stop it.
3. OK John, I get the idea Israel as a nation is collectively guilty. We've been discussing this for many lessons now. How does this lesson apply to our lives?
  - a) First of all, it gives us some insights on how God "thinks". Yes, God punishes people when they are disobedient and there is a point where it is too late. A fear of the "too late point" is a motivational tool to keep us close to God. Still, know that God "weeps" over sin and its affect upon people.
  - b) The main point of Chapter 20 is about understanding why judgment is necessary. If you think only "Israel" can be judged individually or corporately, then you still need to learn some things about God. One thing to learn is that if we are His representatives, then He holds us accountable to Him as a witness, as individuals and groups.
4. Chapter 19 can be summarized by the last line: "This is a lament and is to be used as a lament."
  - a) In other words, this whole chapter is God lamenting over the fall of the nation of Israel.
  - b) The chapter brings up an interesting question: "Can God weep?"
    - i) God is not a human sitting on a big chair with a set of emotions that cries when He is sad. The idea is God knows the effects of sins and weeps over its effects.
    - ii) God knows all things. I recently reread the book of Deuteronomy and I was amazed at how much "history in advance" was written in that book. In other words, God described the fall and destruction of Israel as a nation centuries before it ever happened. Nothing in Ezekiel (or anything in the bible or our lives) is a surprise to God. A perfect God cannot learn and knows all things.
    - iii) If God knows all things, then take comfort in that fact as one goes through trials. The point is we may not know the outcome of all things, but God does.
  - c) This leads us back to Chapter 19. The chapter is God "mourning" over the fate of the Jewish people and the end of the nation of Judah.

5. Another way to describe God "lamenting" is to realize "He didn't want this to happen". It was God's goal for His people to live, flourish and be His witnesses in the Promised Land. God is lamenting over their fate even though He knew it would happen.
  - a) God may know what is going to happen, but it still bothers Him how the sins of our lives have caused this damage.
  - b) A very similar concept was when Jesus wept over the coming destruction of Jerusalem as described in Luke 19:41. Jesus knew that Israel would no longer exist as a nation relatively soon after His departure. Still, Jesus lamented over that fact and the New Testament records that Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Did Jesus know about the destruction of Jerusalem as a future fact? Yes. At the same time, He wept over it and wished it wouldn't be necessary.
  - c) This leads us back to Chapter 19. Let's say years from now, you forget all the details of this chapter. You forget that "this symbol means this person" etc. The most important thing to remember is that God does "weep" over sin and He wishes punishment wasn't necessary and that people would act differently.
  - d) It comes down to the fact that "God hates sin, but God has to allow free will in order for us to freely choose Him over sin. God hates the fact that people turn from Him. If you recall from Chapter 18, Verse 23, God said in effect, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked". That comment from Chapter 18 is the same principal being applied here in Chapter 19. It is God "lamenting" over what has happened to His "chosen people", but God can't stop it as free will must exist and there are consequences for disobedience.
6. Chapter 20 is along the same theme of "it is too late for me (God) to change my mind. In that sense, Chapter 20 gives a history of Israel's sins from God's perspective. It is God explaining why this punishment is now necessary and how it is too late to prevent that punishment. The main point is to understand that there is a point of no return with God and that should be a motivating factor to keep us close to Him.
7. Chapter 19, Verse 1: "Take up a lament concerning the princes of Israel <sup>2</sup> and say:
  - a) OK, let me take on the "why" question: Why write a funeral dirge for the leaders of Israel.
    - i) The Nation of Israel is "God's chosen people". They were created as a single nation by God and brought out of Egypt roughly a thousand years earlier.
    - ii) Within a few years of this dirge is an end of what is left of Israel as an independent nation. They would not be united as an independent people until 1946.
    - iii) One gets the impression that God didn't want to break up the nation, but didn't have a choice, due to their continual, collective rebellion.
    - iv) The important point is that God needs to show that "He is God" not only to the Israelites but to the other nations in the area. If God failed to punish the Israelites for disobedience, then the "world" would know to not take God seriously as He just forgives people who fail to live up to His standards of right and wrong.
  - b) Obviously, God is not done with the Jewish people as a nation as they did reunite as a single entity 70 years after the captivity, but subject to various foreign powers.
  - c) Which leads to "us": We as Christians are too, called to be His witnesses to the world. When we fail, we can be punished too, as individuals or as some sort of group. Salvation is a separate issue. This is about being a good witness for God.
8. Verse 2: "What a lioness was your mother among the lions! She lay down among the young lions and reared her cubs. <sup>3</sup> She brought up one of her cubs, and he became a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men. <sup>4</sup> The nations heard about him, and he was trapped in their pit. They led him with hooks to the land of Egypt.
  - a) The Israelites are compared to lions and lion cubs in these verses. The mother lion can be a reference to the nation of Israel or God Himself. Either way, it fits the story.
  - b) The Nation of Israel (OK, the Nation of Judah, you know what I mean by now ☺) is the reference to the "lioness mother" in Verse 2.

- c) The important point is that a "king" was raised up from the Jewish people. The focus of this "dirge" is on the last few kings of Judah. Those kings are the lion cubs in this chapter.
  - d) One of the last kings of Judah named Josiah. He is the king in focus. 2nd Kings Chapter 23 tells the story of Josiah and it is a good cross-reference to these four verses. Essentially Josiah was a good king, but he made the mistake of taking on Egypt and was killed.
  - e) Verse 3 says this king "learned to tear the prey and devour men". Based on the 2nd Kings passage, it appeared Josiah removed "evil" from the land and therefore this "devour men" reference as that Josiah eliminated evil men from the land. The idea of the "nations heard about him" is because Josiah obeyed God, he was getting successful and his enemies trapped him in the sense that he took on (attacked) Egypt when that was not God's intent.
  - f) OK John, so there was a good king named Josiah, why should I care? The point of this dirge is that even a good king liked Josiah couldn't stop the fate of what was about to happen! The nation of Judah (i.e., what was left of Israel) was on a collision course with death and it was too late to stop it.
  - g) I think what God is trying to get across is the idea that there is a point where it is "too late" and even good efforts at that point can't make a difference. Am I saying there is a point where it is too late for people to be saved? The New Testament does hint of such points, but we as humans never know when that comes. The point is God has had enough of the nation's disobedience and now the punishment is definite and is going to happen now.
9. Verse 5: "When she saw her hope unfulfilled, her expectation gone, she took another of her cubs and made him a strong lion. <sup>6</sup> He prowled among the lions, for he was now a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men. <sup>7</sup> He broke down their strongholds and devastated their towns. The land and all who were in it were terrified by his roaring. <sup>8</sup> Then the nations came against him, those from regions round about. They spread their net for him, and he was trapped in their pit. <sup>9</sup> With hooks they pulled him into a cage and brought him to the king of Babylon. They put him in prison, so his roar was heard no longer on the mountains of Israel.
- a) Verse 5 starts with "When she saw her hope unfulfilled". Remember the "mother lion" is either a reference to God watching over the Jewish people or a reference to the nation itself. The main point is the baby lions are references to the kings being raised up.
  - b) After Josiah was killed fighting the Egyptians, there was another king that was so bad he only reigned three months. Next was a king named Jehoiachin. This is the king who was taken off to Babylon and made an oath to be loyal to Babylon. This is the king that God condemned because of that "oath" and the fact that Jehoiachin then tried to make a deal with Egypt. That was a key point back in Ezekiel Chapter 17.
  - c) In Verse 6, it says this new lion "learned to tear the prey and devour men". Based on the text in 2nd Kings Chapter 24, this is a negative reference. This king was considered "wicked" in God's sight (see 2nd Kings 24:7) and it probably refers to the fact this king reversed the positive accomplishments stated about King Josiah.
  - d) To summarize these verses, it is a poetic way of describing how this king was taken off to Babylon. 2nd Kings said this man never returned to Israel, which is why Verse 9 says, "his roar was never heard no longer on the mountains of Israel."
  - e) OK John, you expect me to care about some kings who died thousands of years ago? ☹ Odds are good you will forget (or get the names mixed up of) these king's names sooner or later. What God wants us to learn is that when we turn from Him, there are consequences for our actions. Remember this whole dirge is God saying in effect, "He is sorry it happened". God is not sorry in that the punishment could have been avoided. God is sorry in that it was sad that this is necessary and wished that people out of their free will would turn to Him.

10. Verse 10: "Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water. <sup>11</sup> Its branches were strong, fit for a ruler's scepter. It towered high above the thick foliage, conspicuous for its height and for its many branches. <sup>12</sup> But it was uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground. The east wind made it shrivel, it was stripped of its fruit; its strong branches withered and fire consumed them. <sup>13</sup> Now it is planted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land. <sup>14</sup> Fire spread from one of its main branches and consumed its fruit. No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler's scepter.'
- a) In Verse 10, the subject is the same, but the analogy changes from a lion to a vine. God is no longer comparing the leaders of Judah to lion cubs. Now, God is comparing the nation of Judah to a "vine in a vineyard". The point is God wanted the Jewish people to flourish and be a good witness for Him. God provided everything they could need. At the time of King Solomon (several hundred years earlier) Israel was at the peak of its power and was a great and powerful nation. Through a series of bad kings, the divided nation has now gotten so bad spiritually, that God has no choice but to bring this nation to an end.
  - b) This paragraph is describing a vineyard that was once fruitful and a "good vine". It was uprooted and is now not producing fruit. The amazing thing is that God is saying He is not going to destroy the Israelites completely, but just move them to a "dry and thirsty land". The Jewish people are going to be moved elsewhere in the Babylonian Empire where they will not produce any "fruit" for God.
  - c) OK John, I get the idea that the Jewish people are uprooted and removed. Tell me again, how this applies to me? Christians are not united in a single land like the Jews were in Israel. Christians are a "united kingdom" by the Holy Spirit and come from all points of the globe. Still, God expects members of His kingdom to produce fruit for Him.
    - i) Can Christians be punished for disobedience? Yes. At the worse, God can bring our living witness to an end like the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira who were taken by God for lying to the church. (Acts, Chapter 5). I am convinced that God does bring an end to individual churches and individual ministries that are not "fruitful" for Him. That is a point in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3 about "unfruitful" churches and the price to be paid when we fail to be loyal to God.
    - ii) Does that scare me as I put together bible studies? Very much so! Does that mean I am to live my life with a sense of fear? Not in terms of salvation, but the idea of a "healthy fear of God" is to realize we are His witnesses in this world and God does hold us accountable for that fact. It doesn't mean we have to live with a sense of terror. It does mean we are to study His word and do our best to follow its ideas for our lives, as we are witnesses for Him.
    - iii) Does this mean that every bad thing that happens to us is God punishing us? No. God allows bad things to happen to us, ultimately to glorify Him. I can't explain any or all things that happen to us. I am just saying that one has to consider the idea that God does punish "His own" who fail to honor their commitment.
11. Verse 14, Part 2: This is a lament and is to be used as a lament."
- a) This chapter ends with a reminder that all of Chapter 19 is a "lament". It is another reminder that the whole chapter is a dirge for the fall of the nation.
  - b) Again, one gets the idea that God wishes this punishment is not necessary. The dirge is necessary in that God's "chosen people" loved idolatry to the point where it was now an incurable disease and required their removal from the land of Israel.
  - c) Remember that God promised King David that one of his sons would always sit on the throne. (See 2nd Kings 7:12). All of the kings of Judah were direct descendants of David. I suspect the Jewish people falsely thought the Kingdom of Judah would never come to an end until the Messiah comes as there would always be a son of David on the throne.
  - d) God never promised Judah would always be a kingdom. He just promised that the Messiah would be a descendant of David and would rule forever.

12. Chapter 20, Verse 1: In the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day, some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD, and they sat down in front of me.
- a) The last time Ezekiel gave a "date" in his book was back in Chapter 8. The interesting thing is that it was less than a one-year time gap between Chapter 8 and Chapter 20. That means that all of the visions and speeches between Chapter 8 and Chapter 20 happened in less than a one-year time gap. I want you to understand this is a "tight time gap" that we have been covering for the last group of lessons.
  - b) Anyway, on "Day 10 of Month 5 of Year 7" for the Jews living in the Babylonian empire, a bunch of the leaders of Judah went to Ezekiel and asked to "inquire of God".
    - i) Just what they wanted to inquire about is not stated. I'm pretty sure it wasn't some sort of sports question or what shall we have for dinner tonight. ☺
    - ii) It probably was a serious question about the future of the Jewish people.
    - iii) The point is God will not answer their question, as we shall read.
13. Verse 2: Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>3</sup> "Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Have you come to inquire of me? As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of me, declares the Sovereign LORD.'
- a) God's response is in effect, "I will not let you people inquire of me". The idea is that the planned punishment against Israel is now "certain and final".
  - b) God is going to go on for the rest of the chapter to explain why the Israelites are no longer allowed to inquire of Him through Ezekiel. God is going to give a history of the nation of Israel from His perspective and focus on Israel's history of idolatry.
  - c) The main point of this chapter is to show through the history of Israel how it is too late to avoid punishment and the planned destruction is now certain.
    - i) God told Moses roughly a thousand years earlier that the Israelites could be removed from the land for disobedience.
    - ii) "Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess." (Deuteronomy 28:63).
  - d) The interesting point of this chapter is the fact that God won't answer their question, doesn't stop God from talking for almost 50 verses. ☺ God is using this chapter to explain from His perspective why it is now "too late" to change things.
14. Verse 4 (Part 1): "Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man?"
- a) God is not asking Ezekiel to judge the Israelites. God is asking Ezekiel to speak on His behalf and explain to them why He won't listen to the inquires of the Israelites. In other words, God is saying it is too late to plead for mercy.
15. Verse 4 (2nd Sentence): Then confront them with the detestable practices of their fathers <sup>5</sup> and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day I chose Israel, I swore with uplifted hand to the descendants of the house of Jacob and revealed myself to them in Egypt. With uplifted hand I said to them, "I am the LORD your God." <sup>6</sup> On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands. <sup>7</sup> And I said to them, "Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the LORD your God."
- a) God is describing from His perspective, how the Nation of Israel first started. God starts by saying in effect that He made a promise to the descendants (house) of Jacob that God would make them a great nation. He took them out of Egypt into the "Promised Land".
  - b) Even back in Egypt, Israel had a problem with idols. Verse 7 describes the idols (gods) of Egypt and how the Israelites were showing mixed loyalty to Egyptian gods and God.

16. Verse 8: "But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; they did not get rid of the vile images they had set their eyes on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in Egypt.
- a) Verse 8 is saying the Israelites had idolatry even while they were still slaves in Egypt. God told Abraham that the Israelites would be redeemed after 400 years (Genesis 15:13) and God expected the Israelites to trust in Him during that 400-year period.
  - b) How much God held Israel accountable as a nation while still slaves in Egypt prior to Moses is a debatable question. The point here is that God understood that the Israelites had "idols in their hearts" as far back as their days in slavery.
  - c) The idea of this verse is the Israelites of that day were no better than the Egyptians when it came to worshipping idols. If it wasn't for the unconditional promises God made to Abraham and to his son Isaac and his son Jacob, God could have justified wiping out the Israel nation even "this far back" for their sins.
17. Verse 9: But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the desert. <sup>11</sup> I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. <sup>12</sup> Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.
- a) In these verses, God is saying He brought the Israelites out of Egypt for the "sake of His name". In other words, God made a promise to Abraham and His reputation is now on the line for keeping His word. These verses are implying that it was not because of the "goodness" of the Jewish people that God did all of this.
  - b) The concept of the Sabbath's is being emphasized. The main purpose of the weekly Sabbath is to take time off and reflect upon God and His requirements for our lives.
  - c) Remember the whole chapter is a speech God is giving some Israelite leaders in Babylon through Ezekiel. God's point of this speech is that "idolatry is in their hearts" and despite all of the miracles He performed, it was not enough evidence to overcome this idolatry.
    - i) The lesson for us is that God rescues each of us to "one of His" and God does not want any mixed loyalty between Him and other gods.
  - d) These verses are discussing the fact that God gave the Israelites "His laws". God makes the statement that "The man who obeys them will live by them". The idea is that those who claim to live "By the Law" are now bound by those laws.
    - i) This is interesting from a New Testament perspective. Peter told the fellow church leaders in effect, "Why should we as Jewish-Christians put the burden of keeping the Law on non-Jewish Christians when we as Jews could never keep them?" Peter then went on to say that salvation is not about keeping the law, but trusting in Jesus' payment for sins for one's salvation. (Acts 15:7-11).
    - ii) One of the points of Jewish history is to show that it is impossible to please God by keeping the law in the sense that our sinful nature always wants to rebel against Him. Israel, corporately never kept the law in their history. Does keeping the law lead to a better life on earth? Yes, if one can do it. The point is the history of Israel has shown how impossible it is to corporately keep the law.
    - iii) What about religious Jews today? Yes they do their best to follow God's laws. The problem is they can't be perfect and there are no blood sacrifices offered for the forgiveness of their sins. The only way to be "perfect" to let God Himself pay the price for sins as opposed to approach God based on one's ability to be "perfect".
  - e) Getting back to the text, the point is God lead the Israelites out of Egypt. In the desert between Egypt and Israel, God gave them His set of decrees to live by. Further, God gave them the concept of the Sabbath, which is about taking one day of rest from one's work.

- f) I could go into a long discussion here about Christians and the Sabbath. The essential idea is we should take some time each week away from one's normal schedule and dedicate that time to God. I don't believe Christians have to observe the Sabbath on either Saturdays or Sundays. The key issue is about taking time out of one's week for God and set that time as "holy" for God. (See Romans 14:5).
18. Verse 13: "Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws--although the man who obeys them will live by them--and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths.
- a) God is reviewing the history of Israel beginning from the time they were in Egypt. We are now up the period where Moses was leading them for 40 years in the desert.
  - b) Remember God gave them the Law within a short time span after leaving Egypt. For the next 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert. God punished them because they didn't trust Him about conquering the Promised Land and He said that current generation had to die out before the next generation could actually enter the land.
  - c) During that 40-year period, the Israelites failed to keep God's Sabbaths and worshipped other gods. How do I know this? There are a few references to rebellions in the Book of Numbers. There is also an interesting comment in Amos 5:25 which said in effect that the Israelites did not offer sacrifices to God during their time in the desert.
19. Verse 13 (cont.): So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert.<sup>14</sup> But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.
- a) If the Israelites were so disobedient at this time, why didn't God wipe them out then? The answer is in Verse 14: "But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out".
  - b) In other words, the surrounding nations knew (or would soon know) that God rescued a large group of people out of the greatest Empire of that time. God has a dilemma in that He wanted the surrounding world to know that He, and He alone is God. At the same time, God must show that those who follow Him must also obey Him.
  - c) My point and Ezekiel's point is that God spared the Israelites not due to God's forgiveness or God's goodness, but because of His unconditional promises to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the Promised Land.
  - d) Ezekiel is giving an Israel history lesson but is changing the perspective to teach that it was not because of Israel's "goodness" that they got to inherit the land, but only because God keeps His word.
20. Verse 15: Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them--a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands--<sup>16</sup> because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols.<sup>17</sup> Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert.<sup>18</sup> I said to their children in the desert, "Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols."<sup>19</sup> I am the LORD your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.<sup>20</sup> Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God."
- a) God is saying in effect, "Those Israelites who wandered in the desert did not do what I told them to do. God told the next generation, (the one who was to enter the Promised Land) and told them in effect, "Don't do what your father's have done".
  - b) Why this history lesson? What happened to the principal of the last lesson where the sins of the fathers (and forefathers) are not past on to the next generation. (See Ezekiel 18:20).
    - i) The answer is God is giving a history lesson to show that the Israelites have always been disobedient and God will eventually get to the point that this generation is no better than any of the previous generations.

- c) At the same time, God is preaching what the Israelites should be doing. The key point is about "Keeping His Laws" and observing His Sabbaths. God is preaching that it is too late as far as His planned punishment is concerned, but it is never too late in terms of turning one's life for the better and following Him.
  - d) Remember that this whole speech is triggered by the fact that some Israelites wanted to inquire of Ezekiel. God is saying in effect, "You have not listened to me in your lifetime just like your forefathers and therefore I will not answer your inquiries about the future of Israel". Is God saying "this" generation is worse? Yes in the sense that they should have known their history and still continued in the same practices.
  - e) This text is also saying in effect, "Since you're inquiring of me, I won't listen to what you have to say, but maybe since you are here, you might be interested in what I have to say!"
21. Verse 21: "But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws--although the man who obeys them will live by them--and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the desert. <sup>22</sup> But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.
- a) Remember that this section of the speech is not about the current generation of the Israelites, but about past generations. God is recounting the history of Israel with an emphasis on how much they have turned from Him. The text is teaching the only reason God did not carry punishment out earlier against them is because God wanted to be a witness to the surrounding nations and show that God follows through on His word.
  - b) Why is God stating all of this? For starters, so the current Israelites would consider how they are acting and turn the right way. For us the readers, it is so we can follow God with our whole heart and not turn to other gods while claiming to be followers of Him.
22. Verse 23: Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries, <sup>24</sup> because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their fathers' idols. <sup>25</sup> I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by; <sup>26</sup> I let them become defiled through their gifts--the sacrifice of every firstborn--that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD.'
- a) The idea is that God wanted to punish the nation of Israel as far back as the desert days. Yet, God kept the nation going out of His mercy and because His reputation was on the line to the surrounding nations.
  - b) Now we get back to the principal that "There is a point where it is too late." Verse 25 says that God "gave them over to statues that were not good and laws they could not live by". There is a lot of debate over this verse. It seems to be implying that the Israelites were now under condemnation as they could not or would not obey God's laws.
  - c) Verse 26 mentions the "sacrifice of the first born". I talked about this a few lessons back. This is the worship of a false god named "Molech". In order to show one trusts in Molech, one sacrifices their newborns to him to show they trust Molech to provide more children.
  - d) How this applies to our generation today? God can say to people in effect, "OK, you don't want Me and you want to live however you want? OK, you have free will and I won't violate that. In fact, if that's the lifestyle you have chosen, I will make you enjoy living that way more and more to show you sooner than later the consequences of choosing that lifestyle. In other words, God is working up to His "mercy killings" (when they die physically and spiritually) for those who choose to willfully disobey Him.

23. Verse 27: "Therefore, son of man, speak to the people of Israel and say to them, `This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In this also your fathers blasphemed me by forsaking me: <sup>28</sup> When I brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that provoked me to anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings. <sup>29</sup> Then I said to them: What is this high place you go to?' ". (It is called Bamah to this day.)
- a) Much of this lecture has been God saying how bad the "forefathers" of the Israelites were. That topic continues through Verse 28. One could just here the Israelites in front of Ezekiel thinking, "Well, they may have been bad, but we are better". God responds to that question is Verse 29 that says, "What is this high place you go to?"
    - i) God is saying that this current generation of the Israelites are no better than any of the previous generations that God was on the "edge" of wiping out due to their disobedience. Verse 28 mentions "high hills". The Israelites set up false gods in some of the high-hill locations or under leafy trees. Remember that Israel is mostly desert country and people take rest under leafy trees.
  - a) So if that generation of Israelites were no better than the previous ones, why did God wait until this generation to actually remove the Israelites from the land?
    - i) The answer through the text so far is that God cares about "His name" in that God made unconditional promises to bring the Israelites to the Promised Land and therefore, "so far" it was about God keeping His promises for His name sake.
    - ii) God was trying to teach that the Israelites didn't "earn anything" by being in the Promised Land from the time they first got there until now.
    - iii) But what about the "good people" that have existed from Moses up to this point? The bible is full of good people including David who showed strong faith in God through all of these years. The point is they were the exceptions and not the rule and despite those good people, the nation, as a whole turned against God.
    - iv) Going back to the question of why did God wait until "this point" to end the nation shows God's patience can only be tested so far. In other words, there is a point of no return.
    - v) We discussed a number of lessons back where God says in effect, "I'll make your punishment seven times worse" if you continue to disobey me. It was God saying, "This is your punishment for disobedience". If you continue to disobey me after that, then I'll make it seven times worse. God repeats that phrase four times in Leviticus 26 with the final warning being, "and if you continue to disobey me, you are out of the land". (See Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24 and 28). We are now at this point.
  - b) OK John, this was scary stuff for a group of people who lived several millenniums ago. ☺ How does it apply to us? It is to understand that disobedience to God has a price and to continue to turn from Him not only has eternal consequences, but one can get to a point in life where God "gives one over" to one's sins and it is even harder to turn back. If you want a motivation to turn from one's sin, that is it.
2. Verse 30: "Therefore say to the house of Israel: `This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Will you defile yourselves the way your fathers did and lust after their vile images? <sup>31</sup> When you offer your gifts--the sacrifice of your sons in the fire--you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. Am I to let you inquire of me, O house of Israel? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will not let you inquire of me.
- a) God sums up this speech by saying in effect, "Look, how dare you Israelites desire to inquire of Me (God) when you don't do what I say? You Israelites continue to go after other gods and continue to offer your sons in the fire (sacrifices to Molech) to this day. Therefore, I (God) am not interested in your inquiries of Me!"

- b) As to what specific question the Israelites had of God, we don't know. The most likely answer is they were curious about their own fate (those already in Babylon) or had more questions about the destruction of Israel. God is answering those questions by saying in effect, "You guys are no better than your ancestors and that is not a good thing!"
  - c) The application is the same today as it was to that generation. To those who desire to "live however they want" and then want to ask what God expects of them. The answer is effectively the same. God would say to the current generation. "Look, you have rejected my Son Jesus and now you want to know your future. No chance. Do what I ask of You (i.e., ask Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and come to me "broken and empty") and then we can talk about what I want for your life".
  - d) The application to the Christian is to say to God, "Hey, I know I have messed up, but I am sorry and I want to turn from that act. Help me to go down the path you desire for me and help me to be the person You want me to be." It is that type of humble prayer that God does respond to, as opposed to the Israelites who wanted "both" in the sense they still wanted to do whatever they wanted and claim to be a follower of God.
3. Verse 32: "You say, "We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone." But what you have in mind will never happen.
- a) From Verses 32 to 38, God starts a new topic. The general idea is that the Israelites are saying they just want to be like the other nations around them. Did they literally say that or is it a matter of their actions speaking louder than their words to God? Most likely the latter. The idea is God will not accept a "half-hearted" commitment to Him.
4. Verse 33: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath.
- a) God is telling the Israelites that He will rule over them whether they like it or not. Why? Not because of anything they did on their own, but to keep His promise to Abraham that the "Land" belongs to them and He will be their God.
  - b) How does God do that given all of their disobedience? Verses 34-38 answer that question.
5. Verse 34: I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered--with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. <sup>35</sup> I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you. <sup>36</sup> As I judged your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt, so I will judge you, declares the Sovereign LORD. <sup>37</sup> I will take note of you as you pass under my rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. <sup>38</sup> I will purge you of those who revolt and rebel against me. Although I will bring them out of the land where they are living, yet they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD.
- a) Let me try to paraphrase what God is saying here. "I will bring you back from all the places where I will scatter you. I will judge you as I have judged your ancestors. You will again, enter the land, but it is "under my rod" (I'll come back to that phrase) and I will purge those who rebel against Me. Understand that I will bring them out of wherever they are living, but they will not enter the land of Israel."
  - b) Verse 38 is saying in effect, "I (God) will bring the Jewish people out of whatever land they are living in and they will desire to come to the land, but will not make it in!"
    - i) When will this gathering in the land occur? My personal view is that it is future in that God will gather His people (Jewish nation) together in Israel again. I'll discuss this view a little more in a moment.
    - ii) Others argue that this passage refers to when the 70 years were completed and the Jews re-entered the land. The problem with that view is most Jews who desired to return did return and there was no great judgment as described here.
  - c) Let me return to the phrase "under my rod". This expression is tied to something that shepherds do with sheep. They place a rod (like a big stick) at sheep height and individually count their sheep as they pass under this rod.

- i) The idea is God will examine each Jewish person individually whether or not they "deserve" to be in the Promised Land and to put it mildly, the rest won't make it.
  - d) With that view in mind, the current state of Israel does not exactly fit these verses. The view among Evangelical Christians is that when Jesus returns, He will rule the world from Israel. In order for that to happen, that means that Israel has to exist as a country and "well", be full of Jewish People. The argument is that the events just before Jesus' return will make it obvious to the Jewish people that they were wrong about Jesus being the Messiah and collectively they will seek Him and receive forgiveness and be allowed to settle in the Promised Land. That ties to the idea of "passing under the rod".
  - e) If you recall from the last lesson, I made the statement that "every few chapters, God says something positive to keep the readers from turning away". In these verses God is promising a restored people of Israel, even though many, if not most won't make it. The underlying positive point is that this is not the end of Israel as a nation. (It's not a great positive message for the many who are about to die, but with chapters like this one has to take whatever positive message they can. ☺)
  - f) OK John, again, this is all interesting ancient history and future things about the Jewish people? How does this affect me, other than knowing their fate? Probably the most important thing to get out of this message is that God won't accept a "half-hearted" commitment. If one is going to serve God, then one has to go all the way. One cannot say they are serving God and continue to live a lifestyle that where one puts something in front of God (e.g., money, fame, stealing, adultery, "fill in the blank").
    - i) The point is a commitment to God requires obedience. It requires changing one's lifestyle to that which is pleasing to God. Does that mean we are not allowed to make mistakes? No. It does mean when we realize what we did wrong, we confess those things as realizing they are not pleasing to God and make every effort to turn from those sins.
6. Verse 39: "As for you, O house of Israel, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Go and serve your idols, every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols. <sup>40</sup> For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD, there in the land the entire house of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them. There I will require your offerings and your choice gifts, along with all your holy sacrifices. <sup>41</sup> I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will show myself holy among you in the sight of the nations. <sup>42</sup> Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your fathers. <sup>43</sup> There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done. <sup>44</sup> You will know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.' "
- a) To summarize these verses God is saying in effect, "You Israelites, continue to serve the idols you have made and serve other gods. Understand that at a day will come where I will purge the nation of its idolatry and I will be honored by this nation whether they like it or not! I will force this nation to honor Me as I will eliminate those who refuse."
  - b) So again, is God talking about that generation or some future generation of Israelites?
    - i) When it comes to individual judgment, it is always about "today". God holds all people accountable as to whether or not we accept or reject Him.
    - ii) Remember that no one knows how long they are going to live and God judges us based on how we live now. Therefore judgment day is always "today" based on how we live and the fact we don't know how long we have to live.

- iii) As to group judgment, it is about every generation of Israelites and whether or not they are loyal to Him. At the same time, I believe this passage speaks of a future day when only Jewish people who trust in God will be united as a single entity in the Promised Land (the Land of Israel). Does it apply to the nation as it stands today? Not exactly in that only a percentage of that country is strongly religious. There is a large percentage of the country that lives there today that is not strongly religious. There is also a large non-Jewish population living there today as well.
    - c) Getting back to the "How does this affect me" question, the idea is that God holds us individually accountable and there is also group accountability as well. It can apply to our church or our country or whatever group we are associated with. If we claim loyalty to God, He will not accept a "half-hearted" effort. Either we fully commit our lives to Him, or God will not accept that commitment.
    - d) The positive news of these verses is that the Jewish people can have a hope that God does promise that some of them will be back in the land and those people will honor Him as God. This purging of the nation is necessary and painful, but it is not "the end".
      - i) In similar manner, God purges believers of our incorrect ways of thinking and living and works to draw us closer to Him. A point here is that God never gives up on His people today (i.e., Christians), despite our sins, the same way He never gives up on His chosen people (The Jewish nation) back then.
7. Verse 45: The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>46</sup> "Son of man, set your face toward the south; preach against the south and prophesy against the forest of the southland. <sup>47</sup> Say to the southern forest: 'Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to set fire to you, and it will consume all your trees, both green and dry. The blazing flame will not be quenched, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it. <sup>48</sup> Everyone will see that I the LORD have kindled it; it will not be quenched.' "
- a) If you happen to own a Jewish Bible (i.e., "non-Christian Old Testament") these last five verses are part of Chapter 21. The Christian bible makes Verses 45 to 49 as part of Chapter 20. It's not a big deal in that either way, it is part of the bible. The issue is the whether or not these verses best fit with Chapter 20 or Chapter 21.
  - b) In Verse 45, God tells Ezekiel to "set your face toward the South". Let's start with the fact Ezekiel is in Babylon and this is not one of those "Scotty, beam me over to Jerusalem ☺ visions" like the one in Chapter 8, Verse 3. Whatever the "south" is, I suspect it is a reference something south from where Ezekiel is currently standing.
  - c) So what is "south" of where Ezekiel is currently standing? The land of Israel. In other words, Ezekiel is again, describing the coming destruction of the land of Israel.
    - i) (I've read a few bad commentaries on these verses. The mistakes made usually stem from thinking Ezekiel is in Jerusalem and looking south toward the desert between Jerusalem and Egypt. The verses make more sense if you realize where Ezekiel is standing when he makes this statement.)
  - d) The "forest" as mentioned in these verses probably refers to the people of Israel. I say that because the last sentence in Verse 47 says that "every face" will be scorched by it. Was it a literal fire or it is just a description of the Babylonians destroying the nation of Israel? In the end, it doesn't matter, as no matter what the method used, the point is the nation of Israel will no longer exist and all that survived the onslaught were relocated to Babylon.
    - i) These verses lead back to the questions "not asked" by the elders who inquired of Ezekiel. In a sense, God does answer their inquiries by saying in effect, "The judgment on the land is happening whether you like it or not, and everyone living there will be "scored by the fire" that is coming soon.

8. Verse 49: Then I said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! They are saying of me, 'Isn't he just telling parables?'"
  - a) The chapter ends with Ezekiel wondering, "Hey Lord, they don't believe this is literal or happening soon. They think what I am saying is either a parable (as opposed to a literal destruction) or some long-distant future event." The chapter ends on a question. God will continue to describe the soon to come destruction of Israel in the next chapter, which in a sense, is an answer to this question.
  - b) Since these verses can tie to a different story that begins in Chapter 21, I'll review them in the next lesson and how they tie in.
9. Did everyone survive this lesson? I admit this is a tough one. ☺ I want to assure you to stay with me. The Book of Ezekiel eventually changes to describe the future glorious restoration of the Nation of Israel and God's plans for the future. Yes, all of this stuff is tough to deal with and we get a lot of history lessons just to get a handful of principals that apply to our lives.
  - a) One has to remember that God's judgment is just as real as God's grace! We like the Israelites are only saved by God's grace and forgiveness. God could have chosen to "wipe us out" in our sins as He did most of the Israelites of that day! If anything, all of this should help us to appreciate the grace of God that much more. When we realize the depravity of our own sins, we need to be grateful it is the grace of God that saves us and not anything we do on our part.
  - b) On that all-too-rare happy note, I can end this lesson.
10. Let's pray: Heavenly Father, Thank You for the salvation You have provided through Jesus. Help us not to read these lessons and just think, "Oh, those poor people who miss out on Your grace." Help us to see our own sins and weaknesses and turn them over to You. Help us to live a life that is pleasing to You in all that we do. Clean us out, as painful as that is, so we can be better witnesses for You in our lives. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.
- 11.