

6. Men's failures and God's faithfulness

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It never ceases to amaze me for the things that our Lord puts up with. I don't know about you, He puts up with me a lot – from my just plain dumb repetitive sins to occasional blatant and arrogant thoughts that any good thing that happened was done by myself. Then, the Holy Spirit gently convicts me about my sins. It is so much better to take care of my sins at that stage than later. Because I know that if I wait, I will feel the pain from all around and it will only get worse.

Actually, I don't think that I am the only one the Lord puts up with, He does with all of you as well as the entire human race. If all of our shortcomings and sins were recorded in a book, I mean every single sin that we committed outwardly as well as done in our hearts, the sins and failures of the Israelites in the OT would not look so horrible. As it is written, the Lord kept all of these horrible failures of men to show us not to repeat that kind of tragedy in our future.

1 Corinthians 10:11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

Until now the prophet Ezekiel remained silent except when the Word of the Lord came to him and God permitted him to speak. The three messages recorded in chapters 15-17 were given to the Israel elders who were sitting in front of Ezekiel in his house in Babylon. Though these men looked pious, they were idolatrous according to chapter 14. How do I know this? Because it says so in chapter 14:

Ezekiel 14:1-3 Now some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. 2 And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 3 "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them?"

Since these men and the rest of the Israelites in Babylon and the inhabitants in Israel were so spiritually blind and deaf, the Lord used three illustrations to speak to their hearts – a worthless vine, an unfaithful wife, and eagles and the shoots from a tree. He even used the most vivid language found anywhere in the Bible, but the messages fell on deaf ears.

A. THE WORTHLESS VINE

Ezekiel 15:1-8 The word of the LORD came to me: 2 "Son of man, how is the wood of a vine better than that of a branch on any of the trees in the forest? 3 Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful? Do they make pegs from it to hang things on? 4 And after it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle, is it then useful for anything? 5 If it was not useful for anything when it was whole, how much less can it be made into something useful when the fire has burned it and it is charred? 6 " Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will I treat the people living in Jerusalem. 7 I will set my face against them. Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them. And when I set my face against them, you will know that I am the LORD. 8 I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful, declares the Sovereign LORD."

All of us are familiar with the vine images in Scripture:

1) **Jesus compared Himself to a vine and His disciples to branches in the vine, because we wholly depend on Him for life and fruitfulness. A way from Him, without Him, we can do nothing .**

2) **'The vine of the earth' is a symbol of corrupt ungodly Gentile population during the Great Tribulation. Their future is anything but good.**

Revelation 14:19 So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.

3) **But most often, the image of the vine applied to the nation of Israel.**

During the reign of king David and the early years of Solomon, Israel was useful and fruitful, and a witness to the Gentile nations as a blessing of God. But ever since Solomon introduced idolatry through his many pagan wives to his kingdom, the nation turned from a fruitful vine to worthless wild grapes.

Those of us who are branches in Jesus Christ, the true vine, need to take this lesson to heart. If we fail to abide in Christ, we lose our spiritual power , wither, and fail to bear fruit for His glory. The fruitless branch is tossed aside and eventually burned.

John 15:6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

Some people, especially theologians who like to insist that they are right and every one else is wrong, would argue that this is the key verse to prove a believer can backslide and lose one's salvation or not. Obviously they miss the whole point of Jesus' parable. This is His warning for us to take heed, not to split a hair .

B. THE UNFAITHFUL WIFE

We are living in the age of sex that gratifies sexual lust of all kinds of perversion through the entertainment industry. At the same time they look down on the traditional marriage. To them, being unfaithful to one's spouse is good. But to God, it is a betrayal of His precept of marriage.

In this long chapter 16, the Lord vividly shows the unfaithfulness of Israel from the beginning stage of the nation. But He explains this through the marriage – God's covenant between Him and Israel.

1) The birth of the nation

Ezekiel 16:3 and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.

Many of the Jews were excessively proud of their heritage and called the Gentiles "dogs," but the Lord reminded them that they had descended from the Amorites and the Hittites, and that their great city of Jerusalem was once inhabited by the Jebusites. It wasn't until the time of David that Jerusalem belonged to the Jews and became the capital of the nation. For that matter, their favorite ancestor Abraham was an idol-worshiping pagan when God graciously called him. So much for national pride.

2) The marriage covenant between God and Israel

Ezekiel 16:8 "Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and

covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

At Mount Sinai the Lord entered into a "marriage covenant" with the people of Israel. But as soon as they entered into the Promised Land, they forgot all about the Lord's mercy and kindness. They embraced the idols of their pagan neighbors. Then the Lord allowed the enemies of Israel to attack and harass them. Then they turned back to God and repented of their sins. In His grace and mercy, the Lord forgave them and rescued them from their enemies' hands and restored them. Soon they turned their back on the Lord.

This vicious cycle had gone over and over until king David stepped on the throne. As long as Israel, Jehovah's wife, obeyed His Word and kept His covenant, He blessed her abundantly just as He promised.

3) Back to the idolatry

I call king Solomon "wisest fool" because of his pride and despicable mindset about God's commands. God told the kings of Israel not to have many wives, or too many horses, or too much riches. Solomon disobeyed Him in all three. In his mind, he didn't need God.

Deuteronomy 17:16-17 But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the Lord has said to you, 'You shall not return that way again.' 17 Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself.

He became the pivoting point to the pagan idol worship in Israel. Like the ignorant heathen nations around her, the Israelites worshiped the creation rather than the Creator and abandoned their God for false gods. Israel's pride and ingratitude prepared the way for her idolatry. Believers today who live for the world and depend on the world are committing "adultery" in a similar way. The Lord desires and deserves our full and complete devotion.

James 4:4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Privilege brings responsibility, and responsibility brings accountability.

4) The Lord's discipline against Judah's idolatry

Ezekiel 16:40-41 They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords. 41 They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution, and you will no longer pay your lovers.

According to the Book of Leviticus, prostitutes were to be burned, adulterers and adulteresses stoned, idolaters killed by the sword, and their possessions burned. God used the Babylonian army to inflict these same judgments on the people of Israel. Many Jews were slain by the sword, and the city of Jerusalem and the temple were looted and burned.

The Jews shouldn't have complained to the Lord that He wasn't treating them fairly. They knew the terms of His covenant and He had already warned them through prophets many times that judgment was coming.

The Lord not only knew what they had done, but He saw in their hearts why they had done it. His judgment was not impulsive; He had waited a long time and they had refused to repent.

Ezekiel 16:51-52 Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done. 52 Bear your disgrace, for you have furnished some justification for your sisters. Because your sins were more vile than theirs, they appear more righteous than you. So then, be ashamed and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.

Judah's sin was far worse than Sodom and Samaria because they knew what would happen when people went against the Lord. But they did it anyway.

When a follower of Jesus Christ commits fornication or adultery, it is far worse than an unbeliever doing it, because the believer should know better. It becomes an intentional sin against the Lord instead of the sin that was done in ignorance.

5) God's faithfulness for the restoration of Israel

Ezekiel 16:60 Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.

In spite of the Israelites' unfaithfulness, the Lord is faithful. There will come a time when God's people Israel will remember their sins and recognize God's goodness and grace on their behalf. Their mouths will be shut because of conviction and they will be saved. How can a holy God forgive the sins of rebels, Jews or Gentiles? Because of the atonement that He made on the cross when He gave His Son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Romans 5:20b But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more

C. THE EAGLES AND THE SHOOTS

Ezekiel 17:1-2 And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 2 "Son of man, pose a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel,

From the images of a vine and a marriage, Ezekiel turned to the image of a great tree, two eagles, and three shoots. The Lord said that this message is a "riddle," which means a story with a deeper meaning, an allegory in which various objects refer to people and what they do. The Jewish people were fond of discussing the wise sayings of the ancients and were always seeking to discover deeper meanings.

King Nebuchadnezzar is the first "great eagle" in v3, and the second eagle is the ruler of Egypt, probably Pharaoh Hophra who promised to help Judah in her fight against the Babylonians in v7.

Ezekiel 17:22-24 Thus says the Lord God: "I will take also one of the highest branches of the high cedar and set it out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant it on a high and prominent mountain. 23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. 24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the Lord, have spoken and have done it."

This epilogue provided an oracle of salvation. Wherever God pronounced judgment, He normally declared hope as well. Judah had failed to remain "planted" and "fruitful." In the future, however, after God had cleansed Judah through His discipline, He would take a 'young twig' from the topmost shoots of the cedar and "plant it on a high and prominent mountain". This new cutting was, however, from the "cedar," the messianic line. It was the "tender one," a concept that had messianic implications.

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Whenever God's people turn from His Word and become satisfied with substitutes, they are indeed headed for failure.
- 2) Privilege brings responsibility, and responsibility brings accountability.