

Ezekiel 19 “The Lamentation of Ezekiel”
Psalm 60
Galatians 4:21-31

October 3, 2010

Introduction

19:1 And you, take up a lamentation for the princes of Israel,

Ezekiel 19 is a lamentation.

In the ancient world, a lament was often sung at the funeral of a great man.

Think back to David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19-27).

In a lament, the singer would reflect on the virtues of the departed,

and the great tragedy of his death.

So Ezekiel is commanded to take up a lamentation for the princes of Israel –
at least one of whom is still alive!

Iain Duguid points out that “to conduct a funeral service for a still-living patient
may not always be considered in the best of taste,
but it is an effective way of communicating the certainty
with which a death is anticipated!” (246-247)

This is especially interesting, because Ezekiel just called them to repentance!

Ezekiel just said in chapter 18,

that the wicked man who repents and does what is righteous will live!

But then Ezekiel doesn’t even give them a chance!

He starts singing their funeral dirge!

What do you think God is saying about their chances?

In the three generations of Ezekiel 18,

the righteous father, the wicked son, and the potentially righteous grandson,

Israel is hopelessly mired in the second generation.

Yes, God calls the son of David to repent of the ways of Manasseh –

to repent of the ways of Jehoiakim –

and yes, God calls Israel to return to the ways of Josiah –

but Israel will not repent.

Israel will die.

And even so, I am here today to sing your funeral song!

Because the wages of sin is death – and since you have sinned, you must die.

Children, pay attention!

Because I’m going to ask your parents a question – and I want you to hear it.

Parents, many of you have heard me say from this pulpit,

“Children, you are going to die.”

Since the last time I said that – several months ago –
how often have you talked with your children about death?

I realize that death is a difficult topic.

Death can be an abstract subject for those who have never experienced it.

We have successfully “managed” death in our day.

Through medical technology

we stave off death until old age for most folks.

Through hospitals and funeral homes

we stave off any direct contact with the dead.

But the only benefit we receive from this is denial.

We can ignore death a little longer –

until it *clutches* us to itself with its cold, dark, fingers.

My friend Robert Jefferson Breckinridge had a lot of personal contact with death.

His father died when he was six.

Seven of eight siblings died before he was 41.

He buried two wives.

Seven of his fourteen children predeceased him.

Two daughters-in-law died in childbirth.

And that’s only his immediate family!

He understood that any sickness might be his last.

Death was his constant companion.

Throughout his life, he lost someone near and dear to him (under the age of 50)
about every 4-5 years.

We need to deal more frankly with death.

Because you are going to die.

The number of your days is drawing to its close.

Sing Psalm 60

Read Galatians 4:21-31

Ezekiel 19 is the conclusion to the central statement of Ezekiel’s message.

Ezekiel 8-11 showed us how the glory of the LORD departed from the temple.

Ezekiel 12-18 has focused on the leaders of Jerusalem –

both the princes in Jerusalem,

and the prophets and elders, both in Jerusalem and in Babylon.

Ezekiel 8-19 ends with a lament.

The vision of the glory of the LORD departing from the temple in Jerusalem

ends with a lament for the princes of Israel –

who have ended their days burnt to a crisp.

And there are days that end like this!

There are *centuries* that end like this.

As we go forth to make disciples of the nations –
as we seek to bring the gospel of our Lord Jesus to those around us –
remember that some of God’s most faithful servants
have been those who saw very little fruit.

Think of what has happened in Europe over the last century.
Do you think that there have been no faithful preachers?
No faithful churches?

As church attendance dwindled, and then plummeted,
there have been many faithful pastors,
many faithful churches,
who have sought to make disciples,
who have been faithful to their calling –
and the result was dwindling churches.

We must remember that we plant, we water,
but it is *God* who gives growth.

God tells Ezekiel to take up a lamentation for the “princes” of Israel.

As we have seen, Ezekiel does not use the word “king” (*melech*)
for the rulers of Jerusalem.

He calls them “princes” – minor rulers –
because they are not worthy of being compared with the great kings of the earth.

And as we’ll see, Ezekiel sort of subverts the lamentation genre,
as he pays “tribute” (of sorts) to the princes.

This is not exactly the sort of eulogy that I would want at my funeral!

1. Your Mother – Hamutal the Lioness (v2-9)

2 and say:

What was your mother? A lioness!

Among lions she crouched;

in the midst of young lions she reared her cubs.

As we’ll go through the passage, we’ll see that the lion cubs are Jehoahaz and Zedekiah –
both of whom had the same mother,

Hamutal, the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah (2 Kings 23:31, 24:18).

The prophet Jeremiah speaks critically of Hamutal in Jeremiah 13:18,

suggesting that the queen mother may have had significant power in Jerusalem.

She was powerful enough that her son, Jehoahaz,

took the throne before his older half-brother, Eliakim (later known as Jehoiakim).

The two images in the chapter – the vine and the lion –

are both drawn from Jacob’s blessing of Judah in Genesis 49:

*9 Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?
10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.
11 Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes.*

Notice how much from this passage is used in Ezekiel 19:

the lion's cub and its prey (v3, 6), crouching like a lion (2),
the ruler's scepter (v11), the vine, and its fruit (and possibly the blood of grapes – v10).

Jacob had spoken a blessing at the beginning of the house of Judah.
Ezekiel now sings a lament at its conclusion:

Do you remember what our father Jacob said about Judah?

Well, this is how it all turned out.

This is the funeral dirge of the house of David – of the tribe of Judah.

We saw last Sunday night how God used the lion image of himself in Psalm 76,
but here we see how the sons of David are portrayed as lion's cubs.

This makes sense:

the son of David was adopted by God as his son –
and the Davidic king is *supposed* to resemble God in his leonine rule.

But look at how David's sons do.

They *play* at being lions,
but they can't compete with the big cats!

I want you to see yourself in this story:

Maybe you are Hamutal – training your children for earthly glory –
preparing them for bondage and death!

Or maybe you are one of these cubs –
obsessed with making a name for yourself –
in other words, obsessed with that which will destroy you!

Or maybe – just maybe – you are neither!

Maybe you are the prey!

Maybe you are those who are devoured by the lions!

You may ask – “aren't there any good parts in this story?”

“Can't I be the good guy?”

Sorry – there are no good guys in this story.

Everybody dies.

The wages of sin is death – get used to it!

a. Jehoahaz, Taken to Egypt

*3 And she brought up one of her cubs;
he became a young lion, and he learned to catch prey; he devoured men.*

This describes the life and career of Jehoahaz.

He became a young lion.

This sounds good, right?

The son of David is *supposed* to be a lion.

So he is beginning to become what he is supposed to be!

He learned to catch prey –

Again, that's good!

He devoured men –

Again, that's good!

Wait – he devoured men is good?

Well, yes, *if you are a lion!*

In other words, Jehoahaz is learning how to play with the big cats.

In fact, the imagery here suggests that *if he had been allowed to grow*,
he might have become a powerful lion.

If he had...

But of course, what happens when people here about a young lion who is devouring men?

Man-eating lions generally don't last very long.

And so

*4 The nations heard about him; he was caught in their pit,
and they brought him with hooks to the land of Egypt.*

The young lion was caught in a pit,
trapped and dragged away to Egypt.

So much for Jehoahaz.

We hear from 2 Kings 23:31 that Jehoahaz reigned three months in Jerusalem.

And in verses 33-34 we are told that

Pharaoh Neco captured Jehoahaz, "and he came to Egypt and died there."

But Jehoiakim, the new king (Jehoahaz's older half-brother), taxed Judah to pay Pharaoh.

He reigned for 11 years – while Hamutal waited for her chance to regain power.

And when Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem,

she saw her chance.

Because Jehoiakim died during the siege of Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC,

and his son, Jehoiachin became king in his place.

But only three months later, Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar,

and he and his mother, and all the leaders of Jerusalem

(including Ezekiel)

were taken into captivity.

And Hamutal saw her opportunity.

b. Zedekiah, Taken to Babylon

*5 When she saw that she waited in vain, that her hope was lost,
she took another of her cubs and made him a young lion.*

In 597, after Jehoiachin went into exile,
Hamutal was restored as queen mother,
as Nebuchadnezzar placed her son, Mattaniah, on the throne,
and called him Zedekiah.

So, all told, three sons of Josiah sat on the throne:

Jehoahaz,
Jehoiakim,
Zedekiah.

The first and the last were sons of Hamutal.

Their nephew, Jehoiachin, whom Ezekiel considers the true king,
was captive in Babylon.

Zedekiah reigned for 11 years (597-586), and like his older brother:

*6 He prowled among the lions;
he became a young lion, and he learned to catch prey;
he devoured men,
7 and seized their widows.*

David had done this with Bathsheba.

In other words, Zedekiah is trying to become like David in the worst way.

*He laid waste their cities,
and the land was appalled and all who were in it at the sound of his roaring.*

Like Jehoahaz he was becoming a lion.

But like Jehoahaz, the nations did not wait until he became a real threat.

They dealt with him like people deal with a young lion who is more of a pest than a threat

Some have thought that verse 7 is referring to Zedekiah's oppression of the poor,
but it is not obvious why Nebuchadnezzar would be annoyed by internal affairs in Judah.

Rather, I would suggest that Zedekiah is beginning to get uppity.

We know from 2 King 24 that Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

We also know from chapter 24 that Syrians, Ammonites and Moabites
were coming against Judah.

What would Zedekiah's rebellion consist of?

It would appear that he is engaged in a retaliatory attack on the Syrians,
Ammonites, and Moabites.

Zedekiah is trying to strut his stuff against Babylon and show that he is a big cat.

But as in the case of his big brother Jehoahaz,
the lion cub of Judah cannot compete with the great Lion of Babylon.

*8 Then the nations set against him from provinces on every side;
they spread their net over him; he was taken in their pit.
9 With hooks they put him in a cage and brought him to the king of Babylon;
they brought him into custody,
that his voice should no more be heard on the mountains of Israel.*

Hamutal's first son was captured by Egypt.
Her second son was captured by Babylon.

The lions of Judah have been trapped, caged, and killed.

Quite a eulogy!

How would you like it said at your funeral:
"He thought he was big stuff!"
"He pretended to have it all together."
"But in the end he really didn't amount to much."

Well, I'm here to preach at your funeral.
And you get to hear it straight now, before you die!

You *don't* amount to much!

And all your attempts to strut your stuff and pretend that you are something –
will get you just about as far as they did Jehoahaz and Zedekiah:

enslaved in Egypt,
blinded by Babylon.

As Duguid puts it,

"No matter who you are, no matter how squeaky clean your image,
when God looks at your life, he writes across it in large letters,
'Failure'."

The wages of sin is death.
Those who love Folly will perish in her clutches.

In Proverbs Folly is personified as the foreign woman – the adulteress.
But that is partly because Proverbs is written to describe the way the world should be.

Unfortunately, the world is not as it should be.

Folly is not always so easy to spot.

If Folly was always the prostitute, the adulteress, the woman with a painted face,
we could just avoid her.

But what if Folly is your mother?

Ezekiel has just made this eulogy even worse.

At your funeral, the preacher now adds insult to injury:

“Yeah, he was a real failure – he screwed up everything he ever did.

Oh, and his mother – she was a real piece of work!”

2. Your Mother – Jerusalem the Vine (v10-14)

As I’ve suggested in the outline, we need to see the “mother” as Jerusalem.

But let me first point out that Hamutal is still in view as well.

Ezekiel says that from Hamutal came strong stems – rulers’ scepters.

But *she* was plucked up and cast to the ground.

And fire consumed the strong stem –

and indeed, fire went out from the stem of its shoots to consume its fruits.

In other words, fire came out from Hamutal to destroy her sons.

Hamutal the powerful mother who raised up these young lions –

is also Hamutal the destroying mother who consumed her sons with fire.

We don’t know *anything* about Hamutal’s dealings with her sons.

We know *nothing* about what kind of mother she was.

But Ezekiel says that Hamutal was one of the reasons for her sons’ destruction.

How would you like that said of you?

“If it hadn’t been for his mother, he might have turned out alright!”

(It has been rightly said that Ezekiel 19 is more of a “parody” of a lamentation than a proper lament!)

But it is also here in verses 10-14 that we begin to realize

that Ezekiel is telling a story that is bigger than just Hamutal and her sons.

Because while the lion image could have been restricted to the sons of David,

that does not work as well for the vine.

There *is* a strong connection to the Davidic king in Psalm 1,

which speaks of the righteous man as a “tree planted by streams of water” –

the blessed man who does not walk in the way of the wicked,

but meditates on God’s law day and night.

But the bigger picture has already emerged in chapter 17,

where Ezekiel speaks of Zedekiah as a vine who would be uprooted;

and we saw there that this was connected to Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5,

and the image of Israel as a vine that was transplanted from Egypt.

And last week, in Ezekiel 18, we saw that Ezekiel speaks of the righteous man as well.

To blend together these images,
the righteous man – the blessed Son of David –
becomes a tree of life, a life-giving force for the whole world.

And this is because of his mother.

a. Planted by the Water – until the East Wind Blew

*10 Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard planted by the water,
fruitful and full of branches by reason of abundant water.*

This is a promising beginning!

Your mother started off well.

This is bigger than just Hamutal.

This is Jerusalem – this is the holy city (think back to Ezekiel 16).

Your mother flourished when she was planted by the water.

*11 Its strong stems became rulers' scepters;
it towered aloft among the thick boughs; [lit, the clouds]
it was seen in its height with the mass of its branches.*

You don't normally think of a "vine" towering among the clouds!

But this is no ordinary vine!

This vine is the tree of life from which all nations draw life,
and under whose shade all creatures of the earth find protection.

Remember Ezekiel 17:23 –

“On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it,
that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar.
And under it will dwell every kind of bird;
in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.
And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD;
I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree,
dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish.”

God's promise of the eschatological tree
reminds us of what Israel was supposed to be –
and what Israel's kings were supposed to be.

*12 But the vine was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground;
the east wind dried up its fruit; they were stripped off and withered.
As for its strong stem, fire consumed it.*

We are not told why.

Though reason enough was given in chapter 17 (he broke covenant with Babylon).

Neither are we told *who* plucked up the vine.

Though again, the parallels with chapter 17 remind us how God said,
that he would (by the hand of the king of Babylon) uproot Zedekiah.
“Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it –
wither away on the bed where it sprouted?” (17:10)

And the east wind dried up its fruit,
and fire consumed the strong stem.

But it was not utterly destroyed.
The mother plant was transplanted to the wilderness.

Now, I want you to understand the picture.
We’re getting to the point where the connection with Hamutal
is getting blended with the bigger story – mother Jerusalem.
Because Jerusalem is the mother of all Judah.

And Jerusalem is now in exile in the wilderness –
Jerusalem is now in captivity in Babylon.

b. Planted in the Wilderness – and Fire Goes out from the Stem

13 Now it is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land.

*14 And fire has gone out from the stem of its shoots, has consumed its fruit,
so that there remains in it no strong stem, no scepter for ruling.*

So yes, you could still point to Hamutal –
fire has gone out from her to consume her sons.

She wanted her sons to be king in Jerusalem.
She wanted her sons to sit on the throne of David.

That sounds like a noble goal!
But God had already said that it was too late.
Judgment was coming upon the house of David.
For Hamutal to want her sons to sit on the throne of David
is a death-wish.
Her lust for power destroyed her sons.

But if you pursue the Jerusalem theme, you also see where this is going.
Jerusalem in exile – Jerusalem in Babylon –
is destroying her children.
As Ezekiel looks around at the exiles,
he sees how far short they fall of righteousness.
They are not drinking deeply from the living water –
they are blighted by the east wind of God’s judgment.
They are well on their way to becoming the Valley of Dry Bones
that Ezekiel will see in Ezekiel 37.

They are children of their mother.
And their mother's idolatrous lust for power has consumed them.

Conclusion:

This is a lamentation and has become a lamentation.

We need a better mother!

And this is what Paul says we have found in Galatians 4.

Paul seems to have embraced Ezekiel's understanding of Jerusalem as the failed mother –
Jerusalem as Hamutal.
Or as Paul puts it, Jerusalem as Hagar.

The present Jerusalem – the earthly Jerusalem – Paul says,
is in bondage with her children.
Jerusalem hasn't changed since Ezekiel's day.
The earthly Jerusalem is bearing children for slavery.
She seeks earthly glory, but she ends up destroying her children.
Indeed, the earthly Jerusalem is no better than Babylon.

I want you to think about that.
Because we've been asking throughout Ezekiel,
what does it mean to be "Jerusalem in exile"?
what does it mean to be "Jerusalem in Babylon"?

If Ezekiel's hearers think about this in terms of
"how do we live as citizens of the earthly Jerusalem in Babylon?"
then they are in slavery with their mother, and will be burnt to a crisp.

"But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother." (Galatians 4:26)

If you want to know how to live as Jerusalem in exile –
don't look to the earthly Jerusalem for answers,
don't expect your hope to come from Mt. Sinai.
Rather, look to the heavenly Jerusalem –
look to the heavenly Zion, from which our Lord Jesus Christ came –
and to which our Lord Jesus Christ returned.

That's the message that we saw last Sunday night from Revelation 4-5,
when we saw the Lion of the Tribe of Judah sitting at the right hand of God.
Because in Jesus we have the divine Lion
who has also become the human lion.
In Jesus Zion has given birth to a Son who has become the tree of Life,
and she has now become our mother.

John Calvin declared that

"there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb,
give us birth, [and] nourish us at her breast....
[A]way from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation."

In short, you cannot call God your Father, unless you have the church for your mother.

Our closing hymn (167) draws together the language of Galatians 4
with the language of Isaiah 66 –

one of the passages that most clearly teaches about our heavenly mother Zion.
*"The Holy City of our God, Jerusalem on high,
has given birth unto a Son before her pains came nigh.
O who has heard of such a thing: a land born in one day?
For Zion brought her children forth as soon as labor came."*

Isaiah 66 speaks of how Zion would give birth to a Son,
and then would immediately give birth to a whole land.

It is easy to see the picture of the resurrection of Christ
connected with the day of Pentecost here.

Our closing hymn goes on to speak of the comfort that comes through this news:

*"Rejoice with Zion and be glad, your mother's glory see!
Drink deeply with delight and nurse; be bounced upon her knee!"*

Paul will also use the image of breastfeeding as a picture of spiritual feeding.

We are nourished – nurtured – by the church – by the ministry of word and sacrament.

But then the hymn moves us from Isaiah 66 to Galatians 4:

*"Jerusalem, our mother dear, the heavenly and the free,
your children now inherit all your firstborn Son received."*

And to make clear the Trinitarian foundation of this –
and especially the centrality of the role of the Holy Spirit
in communicating to us the benefits of Christ:

*"All glory to the Father's name, all glory to the Son,
all glory to the Spirit who binds all the church as one."*

Grant, Almighty God, since you have once deigned to insert us into the body of your Son, that we may be such vine-branches as you have undertaken to cultivate: that by the power of your Spirit we may be so watered as never to be deficient in spiritual vigor: and may we so bear fruit to the glory of your name, that we may at length arrive at the fountain of our faith, when we enjoy the celestial glory to which you have adopted us in your only-begotten Son. Amen. (from John Calvin, 281)