

Ezekiel 24 “Woe to the Bloody City”
Psalm 38 (close with Psalm 102)
Matthew 23

October 31, 2010

Ezekiel 24 is *the* key turning point in the book of Ezekiel.

Everything else in the whole book has been leading up to this:

the news that the siege of Jerusalem has begun.

Ezekiel has been warning the exiles that this day is coming.

He told them in chapters 8-11 that the glory of the LORD had departed from Jerusalem.

He has told them over and over that judgment is coming –

and there will be no escape.

Now, here in Ezekiel 24, the prophet learns in the most personally painful way imaginable,
what this judgment is going to do.

It is going to take everything that you love away.

Everything that matters to you will be gone.

All your hopes will be dashed.

I want *you* to understand that this is true for you as well.

It was a year ago this December 1 that I nearly lost Ginger.

It was a reminder that death is coming.

It was a reminder that Judgment Day is at hand.

And in judgment God is just.

He *will* make all things right in the end.

When we are in the middle of history, we do not always see it –

but we know that *in the end*, the God of all the earth will do justice.

Our Psalm of response, Psalm 38, reminds us of this.

The Psalmist is in the middle of the mess – the middle of the pain.

And yet his hope is in the very God who has put him in the middle of this.

You are the one I wait for.

You *will answer!*

Sing Psalm 38

Our NT lesson is from Matthew 23.

In Matthew 23, Jesus says that the judgment in Ezekiel’s day is going to happen again.

You missed the point!

You didn’t get it!

So we’re going to have to do this again!

Read Matthew 23.

Introduction: January 5, 587 – The Siege of Jerusalem Begins (24:1-2)

24:1 In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me:

This dating has perplexed some, because it follows a different form.

All the other date notices follow a regular pattern.

This one diverges from that pattern in order to conform to 2 Kings 25:1.

Ezekiel has been dating everything to the exile of Jehoiachin –

when Ezekiel himself and the rest of the exiles went into captivity.

But here the date is conformed to the style of 2 Kings 25:1.

The reason for this may be found in verse 2.

2 “Son of man, write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day.

Ezekiel’s ministry has been heading for this day for the last five years.

He saw the glory of the LORD depart from the temple in chapters 8-11,

and with the city unprotected by the glory of God,

Nebuchadnezzar will have no difficulty taking the city.

And so Ezekiel is to write down the name of this day.

In those days, messages took a while to get through.

Everyone in Babylon knew that Nebuchadnezzar had gone off to war.

Everyone in Babylon knew that he would either take

the left hand way to Rabbah of the Ammonites,

or the right hand way to Jerusalem (Ezek 21).

But no one knew what day Nebuchadnezzar would besiege Jerusalem.

But the LORD spoke to Ezekiel and said,

“it’s happening.”

Write it down—so that when the messenger comes,

the people will know that I told you—

thereby confirming that Ezekiel indeed has told the truth.

And God say that Nebuchadnezzar has laid siege to (literally, “leaned on” or “laid hands on”) Jerusalem.

This is normally the word used for “laying hands” on an animal before offering it as a sacrifice.

It is also used when Samson “laid hands” on the pillars of the Philistine temple

and destroyed it.

Or when Isaiah warns Jerusalem not to “lean” on Pharaoh—who is a broken staff.

Or when Isaiah calls Israel to “lean” on the LORD—and trust him.

It never means “to lay siege.”

So Nebuchadnezzar is “laying hands” on Jerusalem.

He is preparing Jerusalem for a sacrifice.

Which actually fits well with the parable that Ezekiel tells.
The people of Jerusalem are a sacrificial meal—
but as we will see, they are a putrid sacrifice...

1. The Parable of the Pot (24:3-14)

a. The Parable (24:3-5)

3 And utter a parable to the rebellious house and say to them, Thus says the Lord God:

*“Set on the pot, set it on;
pour in water also;
4 put in it the pieces of meat,
all the good pieces, the thigh and the shoulder;
fill it with choice bones.
5 Take the choicest one of the flock;
pile the logs [1] under it;
boil it well;
seethe also its bones in it.*

The parable of the pot describes a cook preparing a sumptuous feast.

This is not just an ordinary meal.

This meal will include the finest pieces of meat—
the thigh and the shoulder.

And since the pot is a copper pot (see verse 11),
this would be either a court banquet or a religious feast.

Remember that in Ezekiel 11, God had used the image of the pot and the meat
as a picture of security—and had warned that Israel was not secure.

Likewise, this parable of the pot sounds very good.

We *like* feasts!

Choice meat is good!

Why?

Because feasts mean that good things have happened!

But Jerusalem will not live to partake of this feast...

Indeed, Jerusalem is to be the main course!

There are two “therefores” (verse 6 and verse 9)
that structure the interpretation of the parable.

Both declare the same thing: “woe to the bloody city!”

b. Woe to the Bloody City – the Corroded Pot (24:6-8)

6 *“Therefore thus says the Lord God: Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose corrosion is in it, and whose corrosion has not gone out of it! Take out of it piece after piece, without making any choice. [literally, no lot has fallen upon it].*

In the context of a religious feast—“city of bloodshed” takes on a new light.
Jerusalem was the “city of bloodshed.”
The temple was there.
The shedding of blood was essential
to what it means for Jerusalem to be the City of God.
The sacrificial meals were eaten in Jerusalem every year:
Passover, Pentecost, Booths—
all the covenant meals of Israel were eaten here.
Here the sacrifices were offered,
blood was shed—and the choice meat was cooked in a pot.

And, according to the Law, the priest would stick in his fork at random,
and take out a piece of meat for himself and his family.

But now, the pot is filled with corrosion.
At least—that is what most translations have said.
The word here “hel’ah” could mean “rust”—
but the problem is that copper doesn’t rust.
There is another word “hala” that means “sickness”—
and that would fit this context well.

The pot is filled with sickness.
The contents of the pot are the problem.
The people of Jerusalem are not “choice cuts”—they are foul meat.

And there will be no casting of the lot—there will be no “special” cuts—
there is no point—everyone is going to die!

And the reason is given in verse 7:

7 For the blood she has shed is in her midst; she put it on the bare rock; she did not pour it out on the ground to cover it with dust.

Leviticus 17:13 had said that when you slaughter an animal,
you must pour out the blood on the ground, and cover it with dirt.
Again we see the importance of the handling of blood in the OT law.

Jerusalem has mishandled blood.
She did not cover the blood, but left it exposed.
And so the land is under a curse.

Verse 7 shows us what it means to say “woe to the bloody city.”

Numbers 35:33-34 shows what happens when blood pollutes the land:
“33 You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. 34 You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.”

Blood is at the center of the OT ritual system.

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.
With the temple in Jerusalem,
Jerusalem is the holy city—
the place where blood is handled properly in dealing with sin.
But through murder and all sorts of social injustice,
Jerusalem became the bloody city.

The correct handling of blood was essential to the cultic system of the temple.
If blood is improperly handled,
the pollution can only be removed through the blood of the sin offering.
But God says that Jerusalem has become so tainted by blood,
that there is no longer any way to purify the city—
except through fire.

8 To rouse my wrath, to take vengeance, I have set on the bare rock the blood she has shed, that it may not be covered.

In verse 8, then, God says that he will leave this exposed blood on the bare rock
as a reminder to himself of the wrath and judgment that Jerusalem deserves.

c. Woe to the Bloody City – the Melted Pot (24:9-14)

In the second “woe” God sets forth what he will do about Jerusalem’s sin:

First, he will destroy the tainted meat (9-10)—and then he will melt the pot (11-12)!

*9 Therefore thus says the Lord God: Woe to the bloody city! I also will make the pile great.
10 Heap on the logs, kindle the fire, boil the meat well, [literally, “finish the meat well”] mix in the spices, [or, pour out the broth], and let the bones be burned up.*

The Hebrew here is very difficult,
but the phrase “boil the meat well” could also be translated “finish the meat”
likewise, “mix in the spices” could be translated “pour out the broth”
and “let the ones be burned up” uses a word for bones
that is always used of *human* bones.

The point here is the utter destruction of what was in the pot.
But the destruction of the people is not the only point:

11 Then set it empty upon the coals, that it may become hot, and its copper may burn, that its uncleanness may be melted in it, its corrosion consumed. 12 She has wearied herself with toil; its abundant corrosion does not go out of it. Into the fire with its corrosion!

The pot itself has become unclean.

After all, in the OT the unclean contaminates the clean,
and so the clean pot would become unclean through the rotten meat.
Therefore its uncleanness must be purified.

Have you ever had a real “culinary disaster”
where you were tempted to just throw the pot away?
Jerusalem is a true culinary disaster.
No amount of “elbow grease” is sufficient to clean the pot.

Water cannot cleanse it.

The pot must be melted.

And as we have seen throughout the scriptures,
if water does not work, try fire!
This is a corrosion that cannot be cleaned with water.
“into the fire with its sickness!”

13 On account of your unclean lewdness, because I would have cleansed you and you were not cleansed from your uncleanness, you shall not be cleansed anymore till I have satisfied my fury upon you. 14 I am the Lord. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it. I will not go back; I will not spare; I will not relent; according to your ways and your deeds you will be judged, declares the Lord God.”

Verse 13 uses the word “cleansed” three times.

Jerusalem has become unclean.

Water has failed (the ordinary cleansing process required in the law).

Therefore, fire is coming.

I am the LORD.
I have spoken.
It shall come to pass.
I will do it.
I will not go back.
I will not spare.
I will not relent.
According to your ways and your deeds you will be judged.

As Daniel Block summarizes:

“Yahweh assumes the role of the cook who calls for the wood to be piled on and the fire to be stoked as hot as possible. But he is not interested in preparing a meal; his mind is only on destruction. In his rage he pours the contents of the pot onto the fire. Lest any shred of hope remain, the fire is stoked so hot that every vestige of meat or broth in the pot is burned and the vessel purified of its defiling contents. Residence in Jerusalem offers no security; it guarantees only destruction and judgment.” (783)

Perhaps for some of you, the idea of trusting in Jerusalem seems distant.

Maybe you don't understand how someone could have their whole identity
bound up in a city—be it ever so holy!
Well, God gives you a sign as well.

The Sign of Ezekiel himself.

2. The Sign of Ezekiel (24:15-27)

a. “My Wife Died” (24:15-18)

15 The word of the Lord came to me: 16 “Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke;

The LORD refers to her as “the delight of your eyes.”

We are not told much about Ezekiel's wife.

Ezekiel was 34 years old.

so his wife was probably in her twenties.

But she had gone into exile with him.

And she had remained by his side through his mute silence
and wild ravings.

What that first year must have been like for her is never mentioned—
as Ezekiel virtually starved himself!

If we are to take Ezekiel's muteness literally,
then in the last five years he has not spoken a word to her.

We are never told about her experience of all this.

We are simply told that she was “the delight of your eyes.”

And now she will die.

With one stroke, God will remove from Ezekiel the one thing that he loved.

He had learned not to trust in the temple!

He had learned not to hope in Jerusalem!

And now he will learn that his only hope, in life and in death,
is that he belongs to Christ.

I know that you *think* that you love God.

I know that you *say* that your chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

But what if God took your wife? Your husband?

And God tells Ezekiel,
yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. 17 Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men."

Ezekiel's feelings are beside the point.
He may not make any outward sign of mourning.
He may not participate in the mourning rituals of his people
(not even eat the food they bring him).
No weeping—no crying—
keep it all in.

Ezekiel knew the priestly routine:
in Leviticus 21 we are told that priests were forbidden to mourn
for any except the closest of relatives.
The high priest was not even permitted to mourn for his father or mother.

This was not a prohibition of *grief*, but of the outward symbols of grief.

Still, picture what this would have looked like:

18 So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded.

Can you imagine?
Remember that Ezekiel is mute—except for when he speaks the word of God.
We should probably understand this to mean that he never got to say goodbye—
even though he knew that she would die.

The word spreads throughout the community, "Ezekiel's wife died!"
And people gathered to console him—to weep with him—
to bring him the traditional meals...

and they find him sitting there in his turban and shoes—
his ordinary clothes—
there are no tears in his eyes—he is not wailing—

They knew how much he loved his wife.

What is going on?

But all you had to do was look in his eyes!
Because God had granted him this one thing:
"Sigh, but not aloud."
God had not forbidden *grief*.
He had forbidden any outward display.

And so just looking in his eyes would tell them,
Uh-oh, God has another message for us:

b. Ezekiel the Sign: “You Shall Not Mourn or Weep” over Jerusalem (24:19-24)
19 And the people said to me, “Will you not tell us what these things mean for us, that you are acting thus?”

By now they understand that all this was about *them!*
Do you understand what God is requiring of Ezekiel?
Ezekiel must endure the death of his wife in silence,
so that God can get a message across to his people.
Ezekiel—the suffering servant—
must endure this cross for the sake of the God he loves and serves,
and for the sake of the people to whom he was sent.

20 Then I said to them, “The word of the Lord came to me: 21 ‘Say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will profane my sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and the yearning of your soul, and your sons and your daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword. 22 And you shall do as I have done; you shall not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men. 23 Your turbans shall be on your heads and your shoes on your feet; you shall not mourn or weep, but you shall rot away in your iniquities and groan to one another. 24 Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done you shall do. When this comes, then you will know that I am the Lord God.’

And sure enough—Ezekiel is a sign to the exiles:
you shall not mourn over the temple—
nor shall you mourn over your children—
“your sons and your daughters whom you left behind.”
You had thought that maybe you would die in exile—
but a least your children were still safe in Jerusalem.

No—they will die and you will live!

And
“the pride of your power”
“the delight of your eyes”
“and the yearning of your soul”
The temple will fall.
All that they believed in—all that they love—
will be destroyed.

And worse—God says,
I will profane my sanctuary.

I will defile my temple.

I will render it unclean.

And when that happens—
you will be like Ezekiel:
you will be silent—you will not weep—

and yet you will be worse than Ezekiel:
“you will rot away in your iniquities:—
you will groan to one another.

And then you will know that I am the LORD.

In the cataclysmic judgment that takes away that which their souls longed for,
God reveals *himself* to them.
God is going to take away the joy and delight of their eyes—
because he wants them to see something better: *himself*.

Christopher Wright suggests that as Jerusalem in exile looked at Ezekiel
standing over the lifeless form of his lovely young wife, we should hear these words:

“If *this* does not confront you with the reality of what I have been saying,
if *this* does not drive you to repentance before it is too late,
then nothing ever will and God alone will be your judge.” (Wright, 217)

Please understand this:

God *will* take away everything you love more than him.
You can either deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him now—
or he will strip it away from you later!

c. Ezekiel the Sign: “You Shall No Longer Be Mute” (24:25-27)

25 “As for you, son of man, surely on the day when I take from them their stronghold, their joy
and glory, the delight of their eyes and their soul's desire, and also their sons and daughters,
26 on that day a fugitive will come to you to report to you the news. 27 On that day your mouth
will be opened to the fugitive, and you shall speak and be no longer mute. So you will be a sign
to them, and they will know that I am the Lord.”

Verses 25-27 point to a second sign.

On the day when all this happens—
when the temple is destroyed—
a fugitive will come from Jerusalem and report the news of its destruction.

On that day Ezekiel's mouth will be opened.

On that day Ezekiel will finally be restored to some form of normalcy.
(Perhaps more importantly, he will be able to serve as a regular prophet,
speaking to the people—but also interceding with God).
And through this—“they will know that I am the LORD.”

This will happen in Ezekiel 33.

In Ezekiel 33:21, the fugitive from Jerusalem arrives!
And Ezekiel's lips are opened—and he is no longer mute.

Conclusion: Ezekiel and the Justice of God

Sometimes when God calls you, there is a happy ending
(think, Abraham and Isaac).

But sometimes when God calls you, there is no happy ending.
Your wife dies.

God says to Ezekiel, "*Son of man, behold,*
I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke.

Not just "your wife is going to die."
But *I* am about to take her from you.

We are not told how she died—
but we are told that God was the one who "took" her.

Every form of Christian theology teaches that God knows the end from the beginning.
All Christians have affirmed that God is omnipotent—he is God Almighty.
And all Christians have affirmed that God is good—that he is not the author of sin—
that evil does not come from him.

Some have said that God merely "knows" everything from the beginning.
Others have gone further and said that God "*ordains* whatsoever comes to pass."
(the question comes down to is it simply that God "permits" it—
or that God "purposes" it)
But either way you go, it doesn't change the problem.
At the very least, God *knew* that this was going to happen,
and yet, he decided to go forward with creating the world anyway.

And so *if God knew that all this would happen if he created the world—*
then it is also true that God purposed that all this should happen.

I want you to think about this.
If you say that God *knew* all that would happen from before the beginning—
then you are saying that God purposed that these things would happen.
Because if God is free—
then he was free *not* to create.

So, if God knew (if God purposed) that this world would be as it has turned out to be,
how could God actually be good?

Isn't he the author—the cause of evil?

This question has been discussed in Christian theology for nearly 2,000 years!
Gregory of Nyssa—the fourth century Greek father—answers this point
in his *Address on Religious Instruction*—
a book which he wrote to help catechists deal with the common questions of his day.

“Anyone, therefore, who bears in mind the wise purpose of Him who governs the universe
could not be so unreasonable and shortsighted as to attribute the cause of evil
to the Creator of man.

He could not say either that He was ignorant of the future
or that by knowing it and by creating man He was involved in the impulse toward evil.

For He knew what was going to happen
and yet did not prevent what led it to happen.

He who is able to grasp all things within his knowledge,
and sees the future equally with the past,
was not ignorant that man would deviate from the good.

But just as He saw man’s perversion, so He perceived his restoration once more to the good.
Which, then, was better?

Not to have brought our nature into being at all,
since He knew in advance that the one to be created would stray from the good?
Or having brought him into being,
to restore him by repentance, sick as he was, to his original grace?” (285)

Gregory goes on to point out that evil is not a thing.
Evil is deprivation.
It is not as though people turned *to* evil (as though evil were some sort of thing).
Rather, turning away from God *is* evil.

As Gregory puts it:

“His departure from the good at once introduced as a consequence every form of evil.
By his turning from life, death came in instead.
Privation of light engendered darkness.
Absence of virtue brought in wickedness.
And in the place of every form of goodness
there was now to be reckoned the list of opposing evils....

By whom did he have to be restored once more to his original grace?

To whom did it belong to raise him up when he had fallen,
to restore him when he was lost, to lead him back when he had gone astray?

To whom, but to the very Lord of his nature?

For only the one who had originally given him life
was both able and fitted to restore it when it was lost.

This is what the revelation of the truth teaches us,
when we learn that God originally made man,
and saved him when he had fallen.” (286)

You see,

“Ezekiel’s wife dies not because God is powerless to prevent such a thing happening,

but because God has a significant purpose to accomplish through that ‘evil’ also.”
(Duguid, 317)

We have seen *very clearly* in Ezekiel how awful and disgusting sin is.
We have seen *repeatedly* how repulsive our sin is before God.
We have seen *beyond all doubt* that our sin deserves God’s wrath and curse.

How can a good God bring such horrific judgments on the earth?
First, because he is *just*.

When you take into account how horrific our *sin* is—
his judgment makes more sense.
And second, because his purpose is to cleanse and restore his people.
It is only through judgment—through fire and through death—
that God can cleanse his unclean people.

But it was no arbitrary act by which God cleansed his people.
God is just—and because man sinned, man must pay for his sin.
And yet, no man was able to pay the penalty for another!
Only one who had the power of an infinite life
could pay sufficient price to cover the sins of humanity.

And so, into the middle of history stepped the one who was true God and true man.
And he took upon himself the judgment that we deserved.

Why did God take Ezekiel’s wife?

If it was only so that he could be a picture to Jerusalem in exile—
then that was cruel.
It is only in the cross that we see God’s purposes for history made fully known.
And it is only in the cross that we can have confidence
that God *will* make things right in the end.

We may not be able to explain the details in the middle of history.

But God promises that he will make everything right in the end.
In this age, there is no final justice.
In this age, it is often true that the wicked prosper and the righteous perish.

But God promises that in the end he will make all things right.
I know that at some level it is not very satisfying to hear this,
but God says, come to my judgment seat on the final day,
and you will see that I am right.

Until that day, he has given us Jesus.

Until that day, he has demonstrated his righteousness
by sending his own son to bear in his own body the final judgment that we deserved.

God’s purpose in all of history was to send his own Son—

the one who was with the Father in the beginning—
so that he might taste death for everyone.
And since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all,
even so, he now calls us to give up everything for him.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.

Will you follow Jesus, whatever the cost?
Sometimes God will call you to let that which is most precious go voluntarily.
Jesus said to one man, “sell all that you have, give to the poor, and come follow me.”
That does not mean that *everyone* must do this.
What it means is that *some* must.

How do you know?
Well, what has God called you to do?

Augustine was convinced that following Christ would mean denying himself sex.
Francis believed that following Christ required him to sell everything and give to the poor.
Who am I to judge my fellow servants?
But the call of discipleship is *not*,
come, have a happy, healthy, cheerful life!

The call of discipleship is,
“deny yourself, take up your cross, and come, follow me.”