

Ezekiel 8-9  
Psalm 119:49-56  
Revelation 7

“Each in His Room of Pictures”

July 25, 2010

*Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark,  
each in his room of pictures?*

This gets at the heart of idolatry.

What do you do in the dark?

What do you do when no one is watching?

We go to church and worship the Triune God on Sunday –  
and we try to maintain an image of being a good, upstanding Christian,  
when others are around.

But what rules your heart?

Who rules your “room of pictures” –  
that private realm of your heart/mind.

What do you do in the dark?

What do you do when no one is watching?

Psalm 119 reflects the heart of the true worship of God.

The Psalmist’s love for God’s law is rooted in his love for God himself.

Psalm 119 is outpouring of love and devotion to the LORD.

So let’s sing Psalm 119:49-56.

Read Revelation 7.

Children,

in Ezekiel 8-11 we are going to hear about how God withdraws from his temple.

God is going to abandon his people.

Wait – didn’t God promise Abraham,

“I will be your God and the God of your children after you”?

And for hundreds of years the glory of the LORD had dwelt in their midst.

In the days of Moses the glory-cloud that led them to Sinai

filled the tabernacle – and went before them to the Promised Land.

In the days of Solomon, the glory of the LORD filled the temple,

and God promised that he would dwell in their midst.

But now, in Ezekiel 5:11, the LORD warned that he would withdraw from his temple,  
because they had defiled his sanctuary.

Listen to Ezekiel 5:11 –

“Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord GOD,

surely, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things  
and with all your abominations,  
therefore I will withdraw.  
My eye will not spare, and I will have no pity.”

God is going to withdraw from his temple.  
Why?  
Because you have worshiped other gods.  
You have defiled my sanctuary with all your abominations.

Now, children,  
where is the temple today?  
Certainly, Jesus is the temple –  
he said, “destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days.”  
And, when we are united to Christ, we become part of that temple –  
we are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

That is why Paul repeatedly urges us to flee from idolatry!  
Because you cannot have other gods in God’s temple!

Ezekiel 8-11 is all part of a single vision.  
And at the end of this vision, the glory of the LORD will depart from the temple.

And in this vision, especially in chapter 8, the key theme is the theme of “seeing.”  
The verb “to see” is used 13 times in the 18 verses of chapter 8.

And notice the pattern:  
the first thing that he saw was the “the form that had the appearance of a man” –  
the vision of the glory of the LORD that had appeared to him before.  
When Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD –  
only then does he properly see what is going on all around him.

Remember this –  
because you will only make sense of your world –  
you will only see the idolatry around you (and in you) –  
when you see clearly the vision of our Lord Jesus Christ!

### **1. The Elders of Judah and the Vision of God (8:1-4)**

*8:1 In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there.*

This is the second “date” given to us in the book of Ezekiel.  
And so that shows us that we have come to the second part of the book –  
the fifth day of the sixth month of the sixth year –  
otherwise known as September 18, 592 BC.

This is exactly fourteen months after his first vision.

If the 430 days of Ezekiel's lying on his side began one week after his first vision,  
then this second vision begins while he is still lying on his right side every day.

The timing of this vision is interesting.

In Jeremiah 28, during the fourth year of Zedekiah,

(in other words, in 593 BC)

the prophet Hananiah had prophesied that within two years  
the Babylonian yoke would be broken.

Jeremiah had declared that Hananiah was a false prophet.

Perhaps Hananiah's prophecy had made its way to the exiles.

Perhaps as those two years were coming to an end,

the elders of Judah had come to Ezekiel to inquire,

“what do you think?

Will the Babylonian yoke be broken?”

But remember this:

as we go through this vision of what is happening in Jerusalem – in the temple –  
Ezekiel's *speaks* to the Elders of Judah *in Babylon*.

They must hear what Ezekiel says,

if they would learn how to live as Jerusalem in Babylon.

If you would learn how to live as the people of God in exile,

then hear – and see – the Word of the LORD!

In verses 2-4 we see the same vision of the glory of the God of Israel

that we saw in chapters 1-3.

*2 Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal. 3 He put out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. 4 And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the valley.*

But this time, Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD in the temple –

where it is supposed to be, you might say.

And here the ironies begin.

In Babylon, that ancient center of idolatry and corruption,

there was no rival in Ezekiel's vision of the glory of the LORD.

When the LORD appeared to him, there was no sign of Bel, Marduk, Ishtar,

or any of the gods of Babylon.

But now, in the very temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem,  
the gods of the nations have invaded.  
The only place on earth where Ezekiel sees any rivalry to the LORD of all the earth  
is in the temple in Jerusalem!

## 2. The Four Sins of the Elders of the House of Israel (8:5-18)

Verses 5-18 describe the four abominations for which God abandons the temple:

Each scene moves closer and closer to the Holy of Holies.

Verses 5-6 start at the entrance to the altar gate (on the north).

Verses 7-13 then move to the entrance of the court

Verses 14-15 then move to the north gate of the temple itself.

And verses 16-18 are in the “inner court of the house of the LORD”

So Ezekiel starts from the northern gate outside the temple,  
and moves step by step towards the Holy of Holies –  
and as he goes, the idolatry gets worse and worse.

### a. The Image of Jealousy (8:5-6)

*5 Then he said to me, “Son of man, lift up your eyes now toward the north.” So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy. 6 And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations.”*

The ‘Image of Jealousy’ – 8:3-5 – can also be translated “image of Lust” –  
most identify it as the goddess Asherah

2 Kings 21:7 says that Manasseh set up an Asherah in the temple,  
but king Josiah had torn it down when he cleansed the temple.

Ezekiel’s vision could be a vision of Manasseh’s Asherah –  
after all, the book of Kings says that Manasseh’s idolatry  
was the reason why God brought judgment on Jerusalem.

But this is what is driving Yahweh “far from his sanctuary.”

Archeologists have found inscriptions and pictures from ancient Israel,  
with depictions of “Yahweh and his Asherah” –  
showing pictures of Yahweh and Asherah together.

Why would Yahweh-worshippers start worshiping Asherah?

Asherah was the Canaanite fertility goddess.

Her worship included a variety of sexual practices forbidden by Yahweh.  
(Hence the term “image of jealousy” which can also mean “image of lust”)

Later in Ezekiel we will see more clearly the connection between idolatry and adultery.  
Here we simply see the beginning of the theme.

*But you will see still greater abominations.*

**b. The Room of Pictures (8:7-13)**

Read v7-13

*7 And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall. 8 Then he said to me, "Son of man, dig in the wall." So I dug in the wall, and behold, there was an entrance. 9 And he said to me, "Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here." 10 So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. 11 And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up.*

You need to realize how shocking this is.

These are unclean animals – “creeping things and loathsome beasts” (v10).

It would be bad enough to hear that elders are *eating* them –  
but far worse, they are *worshipping* them.

Now, the usage of gods in animal shape strongly suggests Egyptian worship,  
where the gods took the shape of crocodiles, snakes, and dung beetles,  
among other animals.

(Indeed, the dung beetle especially connects well the word for idol in v10 –  
*gillulim* – or “dung god”)

The Egyptian connection also suggests why they are doing this secretly.

Since Jerusalem is under Babylonian control,

it would be most inappropriate to conduct Egyptian worship there –  
since Egypt was the one major power who had successfully fought off Babylon.

But it gets worse.

Because there are 70 elders here.

In Moses’s day, there were 70 elders who led the people in following the LORD,  
as Israel departed from Egypt.

Now, there are 70 elders who are leading the people back to Egypt.

But it gets worse!

Because they are led by Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan.

Now, I know that all of you are horrified by that!

“Jaazaniah! Who would have thought he would have come to this?!”

No, I don’t blame you for not knowing who Jaazaniah is.

This is the only passage in the Bible that speaks of him.

But I would suggest that you should get to know his father, Shaphan.

In 2 Chronicles 34 Shaphan was one of Josiah’s trusted servants,

who helped to cleanse the temple and restore the worship of Yahweh.  
Hilkiah was the priest who found the scroll of the Book of the Law.  
But Shaphan was the one who brought it to Josiah,  
and Shaphan was the one who read it before the king.

What is more, Jeremiah speaks of three of the sons of Shaphan,  
Ahikam (Jer 26:24), Elashah (Jer 29:3), and Gemariah (Jer 36:10-12),  
all of whom were friendly to Jeremiah and faithful to the LORD.

But Jaazaniah is secretly undermining his father's work, and returning Jerusalem to idolatry.  
You can almost hear the elders of Judah saying,  
"No! Not Jaazaniah! Not the son of Shaphan! Surely not him!"

And in another ironic twist,  
Jaazaniah means "Yahweh listens" –  
but in response to the idolatry of Jaazaniah,  
Yahweh says in v18, "though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them."

But here in verse 12, as Jaazaniah and the 70 elders of Israel worship secretly,  
the LORD whispers in Ezekiel's ear:  
"they think I can't see them!"

*12 Then he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, 'The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.'"*

Remember who these men are.  
These are the elders of the house of Israel.  
These are the leaders of the Old Testament people of God – the church.

It would be nice to think that Ezekiel is speaking the exiles,  
saying, "do you see how bad it is in Jerusalem?"  
Well, at least you're not like them!"  
But who are the exiles?  
They are the elders of the house of Israel!  
Nebuchadnezzar had taken captive the leaders of Jerusalem!

The elders of Judah are sitting around Ezekiel –  
and he tells them about his vision when he returned.  
Six years ago, *they* had been the ones leading Jerusalem.  
And they had been no different from Jaazaniah.

Are they secretly hoping that Egypt would come and rescue Jerusalem?  
Are they putting their hope and trust in the gods of the nations,  
rather than in the LORD their God?

What is your secret hope?

Outwardly you act as though the Triune God is your hope and your shield –  
but in the dark – in your room of pictures –  
what false hope do you cling to?

For one woman it was her “white knight,” whom she hoped would come rescue her.

She would dream of him –  
and she would wish that her hum-drum husband  
would be more like the man of her dreams.

And she thought of it as her way of coping with a dull, ordinary life.

It was just a harmless fantasy – right?

It destroyed her marriage and sent her down a thousand dead-end roads,  
before she realized that she was, in fact, worshiping another god.

It is so easy to ‘baptize’ our selfish desires and say that they are godly.

Here’s the test:

do you *live* as though you believe that “to live is Christ; to die is gain”?

Does your heart overflow with love and gratitude to God –  
does Psalm 119 sound like your own prayer-life?

Or do you linger in the dark – in your room of pictures –  
in your secret hopes and dreams and fantasies?

*13 He said also to me, “You will see still greater abominations that they commit.”*

### **c. The Women Weeping for Tammuz (8:14-15)**

*14 Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz.*

We keep getting closer to the Holy Place.

Now we are at the entrance to the north gate of the house of the LORD itself.  
And there sat women weeping for Tammuz. (Literally, weeping “the” Tammuz).

Tammuz was the Mesopotamian god of vegetation.

His consort was Ishtar – the Babylonian goddess of fertility.  
Ishtar was especially famous for dooming her lovers to death.

It was once believed that Ishtar gave Tammuz up to death  
and then went to the underworld to rescue him,  
but it turns out that she was not nearly so nice!

That version of the story was based on an incomplete tablet  
(filled in by scholars who thought they were seeing a pre-Christian version  
of substitution and resurrection).

In fact, when they found the remainder of the story,  
they discovered that when Ishtar died, all reproduction came to a screeching halt,  
and so the gods had to find some way of bringing her back to life.

But someone had to take her place in the underworld.

Tammuz, her one-time lover, hadn't really noticed that she was gone,  
and so when she returned to life,  
she condemned him to take her place in the underworld.  
(Substitution? Sort of – but a rather vindictive substitution!)

Of course, once he died, the vegetation also died –  
and so his sister, Belili, offered to take his place in death for six months each year.  
And this became the “explanation” for why the vegetation died every year,  
and every summer, after the mid-summer month of Tammuz,  
the women lamented his death.  
And the liturgy of this lament was known as “the Tammuz.”

But why would a Babylonian god be worshiped in Jerusalem?  
The Babylonians did not require conquered nations to adopt their worship.  
But when you believe that political power is connected to worship,  
then why wouldn't you “hedge your bets”  
by adding a few Babylonian deities to the pantheon!

And there was precedent for it!  
150 years before, Ahaz, Hezekiah's father,  
built an Assyrian altar in Jerusalem.  
After all, one of the best ways of demonstrating your allegiance to Babylon,  
is by worshipping their gods, even when you don't *have* to.

So while the Egyptian gods are worshiped secretly in the side chambers of the temple,  
the Babylonian gods are worshiped openly at the very gate of the temple.

*15 Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these.”*

#### **d. The Men Worshiping the Sun (8:16-18)**

*16 And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east.*

The temple itself was oriented toward the east,  
so the rays of the rising sun would have come through the entrance into the holy place.  
So in order to worship the sun, you must turn your back to the temple of the LORD.  
Shamash was the Assyrian sun god,  
and sun-worship was a common practice in all the nations around Israel.

To sum up, we have seen Canaanite, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian practices –  
all in the temple precincts.

The glory of the LORD still resides in the temple,  
but it is surrounded by the abominations, the detestable things,  
– the gillulim – the dung-gods of the nations.

Verse 17 opens a new line of thought that Ezekiel will return to later –  
they have filled the land “with violence.”

Idolatry is the root of all other sins.

After all, if you are loving and worshiping the Lord your God,  
then when you sin, you will repent!  
There may be occasional outbreaks of sin and rebellion,  
but the general pattern will be righteousness and justice,  
because love of neighbor proceeds from the love of God.

*17 Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose.*

Idolatry results in every other sin.

Whenever you see a pattern of sin in your life,  
you may be sure that there is a root of idolatry behind it.  
You are loving and pursuing something else rather than the living and true God.

And therefore, God says...

*18 Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.”*

Chapter 9 does not need a whole lot of explanation.

Judgment is coming – and only a remnant will be spared.

### **3. The Destroying Weapons and the Writing Case (9:1-11)**

*9:1 Then he cried in my ears with a loud voice, saying, “Bring near the executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand.” 2 And behold, six men came from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with his weapon for slaughter in his hand, and with them was a man clothed in linen, with a writing case at his waist. And they went in and stood beside the bronze altar.*

Even as Ezekiel had approached the holy place from the north,  
so also do the executioners of the city (the Babylonians) –  
and so also does the man in linen with the writing case.

And they stand beside the bronze altar –  
the place where the burnt offering and the fat of the peace offering was offered –  
the place where God’s wrath was appeased.

*3 Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. 4 And the Lord said to him, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it."*

The mark reminds us of the blood on the doorposts at the Passover in Egypt.

The angel of death is now about to pass through Jerusalem.

The plague of God's wrath is coming.

But before it comes,

there is a sign of hope given to those whom Yahweh will spare.

Think also of Rahab's scarlet cord.

Think also of the mark of Revelation 7 –

the seal that was placed on those who "have washed their robes  
and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

And then God sends out the six destroyers to kill everyone who does not have the mark.

*5 And to the others he said in my hearing, "Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. 6 Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the house. 7 Then he said to them, "Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out." So they went out and struck in the city. 8 And while they were striking, and I was left alone, I fell upon my face, and cried,*

And then, in one of his rare responses to the word of the LORD,

Ezekiel cries out to the Lord for mercy:

*"Ah, Lord God! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?"*

Notice that God's response begins with the question of justice:

*9 Then he said to me, "The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great. The land is full of blood, and the city full of injustice. For they say, 'The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see.' 10 As for me, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; I will bring their deeds upon their heads."*

I want you to see something here:

This is "final judgment" language.

Like Genesis 6:11 in the days of Noah – "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight,  
and the earth was filled with violence."

Or like the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah for their great wickedness in Genesis 19.

Their guilt is "exceedingly great" and the land is full of blood.

Therefore, judgment must come.  
They had said that the LORD had forsaken the land –  
as they have said, so shall it be.  
He will forsake them.

But – and here is the key –  
he will not forsake them utterly.

Because then comes the man clothed in linen:

*11 And behold, the man clothed in linen, with the writing case at his waist, brought back word, saying, "I have done as you commanded me."*

We are not told how many there were.  
Are there any in Jerusalem who grieve and moan over the idolatry and abominations  
of their friends and relatives?  
But the man clothed in linen has gone forth with the Word of God –  
the writing case at his waist –  
and has inscribed the Mark of God upon the heads of his people.

And of course, this is what our Lord Jesus Christ has done –  
as he has gone forth and written his name upon our foreheads.

Incidentally, this was the origin of the patristic practice of putting the sign of the cross  
on the foreheads of the baptized.

The “mark” referred to here is the Hebrew *taw*  
which in its ancient script looked quite a bit like a cross  
(similar to our “X”).  
(have you wondered why it’s always an “X” that marks the spot?!)

In its origin, there was no magical idea –  
it was simply that the minister was viewed as the representative of Christ  
in marking the newly-baptized as belonging to the Triune God.

But of course, it is baptism itself that marks you.  
Paul says that as many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.  
The problem with adding extra rituals is that they always take on a life of their own!

But our Lord Jesus Christ has marked you with his mark.  
He has placed his name upon you.  
You have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, you belong to him.  
And therefore, you must flee from idolatry.

When you are at work this week,

I want you to look around –  
and I want you to *see* the idolatry (each in his room of pictures).  
When you talk with your colleagues – your neighbors – your friends –  
I want you to dig through the wall and see what is going on,  
(each in his room of pictures).  
Because you dwell in the midst of the rebellious house of Israel.

What are the pictures that motivate them?  
What are the gods that they worship.  
It can be easier – at times –  
to see this in others than in yourself.

But as you do this, I also want you to remember what God says about them:  
*(Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women)*

But please – as you remember the judgment that God proclaims against them –  
do not, I beg you, think harshly of them!

Remember also Ezekiel's plea:  
“Ah, Lord GOD! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel  
in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?”  
If you have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,  
then you cannot be haughty in your attitude  
toward those who are committing these abominations!  
If you have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,  
then you must “sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed,”  
and your heart must break as you look at those who are casting themselves  
before gods that do not hear, or see, or speak.

And as you come to understand their idolatry –  
as you come to see their abominations –  
you may also begin to see how you may speak to them.

But before you can speak to them effectively,  
you must first “sigh and groan” –  
because your heart is broken by the same things that break the heart of God.

But if you would learn to speak,  
then you must first learn to see:  
and see first the vision of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!