

If you look at your bulletin, you can see the outline of the passage.

There are two oracles in Ezekiel 13 –

the first against male false prophets (v1-16)

the second against female false prophets (v17-23) –

but these two oracles are bound together in a single “word.” (v1)

Each oracle follows the same pattern:

1) Preamble:

(v2) “Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel, who are prophesying, and say to those who prophesy from their own hearts...”

(v17) “And you son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own minds...”

2) The Charge:

(v3-7) detail the charges: “Woe” to the false prophets

(v18-19) detail the charges: “Woe” to the “witches”

3) The Twofold Announcement of Judgment

(v8-9) begins “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD”

announces that because of their false prophesy “I am against you”
and concludes “and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD”

(v20-21) also begins “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD”

announces “I am against your magic bands”

and concludes “and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

Likewise (v10-16) provide more details about the coming judgment,

and concludes “and you shall know that I am the LORD” (v14)

and (v22-23) provide more details about God’s judgment on the witches

and concludes, “and you shall know that I am the LORD.” (v23)

The difference between the male and female false prophets

is that the male prophets are contradicting Ezekiel’s message of national calamity,

while that the female prophets undermine his message

of life to the righteous and death to the wicked

by killing those who should not die, and keeping alive those who should not live.

And then in 14:1 Ezekiel makes it very clear that we should think of these oracles together,
as he applies the oracles of chapter 13 to the elders of Israel.

Ezekiel is saying that the real problem with idolatry is not the outward form.

The real problem with idolatry is that we bring our idols into our hearts.

There are things that matter more to us than the Lord our God.

And just as Ezekiel says that idolatry will be destroyed –

so also our Psalm of response (Psalm 94) assures us that this will indeed be the case!

Sing Psalm 94

2 Timothy 3

1. Oracle against the False Prophets (13:1-16)
a. False Prophets Build False Expectations (13:1-7)

13:1 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel, who are prophesying, and say to those who prophesy from their own hearts: ‘Hear the word of the Lord!’ 3 Thus says the Lord God, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!

I like Daniel Block’s rendering of v2,

“Declare to the self-inspired prophets”

Private opinions were being spouted off as divine pronouncements.

But in fact they are “foolish” – they are spiritually blind and morally obtuse.

They are “self-inspired” prophets.

And not only are they foolish (v3) but they are worse than useless in an invasion.

4 Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel.

“The average jackal is not busy among the ruins with a trowel and construction helmet, rebuilding what is fallen down.” (Duguid, 172)

The jackal is a scavenger – simply seeking his own benefit!

And so God says to them:

5 You have not gone up into the breaches, or built up a wall for the house of Israel, that it might stand in battle in the day of the Lord.

When there is a breach in the wall, you should do one of two things:

stand in the breach and fight,

or repair the wall!

The prophets are supposed to be maintaining the spiritual defenses of Jerusalem, but they have done nothing.

“Instead of standing in the breach by denouncing evil and reconstructing the wall by calling for the renewal of the covenant ... in which true security was to be found, they have been rummaging around in the ruins, intent on salvaging as much as possible for themselves.” (Block, 402)

6 They have seen false visions and lying divinations. They say, ‘Declares the Lord,’ when the Lord has not sent them, and yet they expect him to fulfill their word. 7 Have you not seen a false vision and uttered a lying divination, whenever you have said, ‘Declares the Lord,’ although I have not spoken?’”

It would be easy at this point to criticize the charismatic churches.

I was once part of a charismatic church,

and having heard quite a bit of charismatic prophecy,

I can testify that there are many “false visions and lying divinations.”

But if all I did was point to the obvious errors of others,
I would not be a faithful watchman.
Because the principle that Ezekiel articulates is far broader:

False prophecy occurs (v7)
“whenever you have said, ‘declares the LORD,’ although I have not spoken.”

You don’t have to believe in continuing revelation to be a false prophet!
Any pastor who follows his own spirit –
who preaches his own opinions as though they were the Word of God –
is a false prophet.

If I cannot show how *God* has said this,
then I am a “self-inspired” prophet.

(By the way, this is why you need to be diligent in your study of God’s Word!
You need to search the scriptures to see if what I say is true –
like the Bereans did to the apostle Paul in Acts 17).

In verses 8-16 Ezekiel declares the coming judgment against the self-inspired prophets.

b. I Am Against You...And You Shall Know that I Am the LORD! (13:8-9)

8 Therefore thus says the Lord God: “Because you have uttered falsehood and seen lying visions, therefore behold, I am against you, declares the Lord God. 9 My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and who give lying divinations. They shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord God.

The first statement (v9) makes clear that the status of the false prophets will be revoked.

“They shall not be in the council of my people,
nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel,
nor shall they enter the land of Israel.”

Do you remember the story of Israel in the wilderness?
Israel rebelled against the LORD, and refused to listen to his voice.
And because they refused to believe his promise and enter the land,
because they believed the word of the 10 spies that their enemies were too strong,
therefore the entire generation that came out of Egypt died in the wilderness.
Ezekiel’s language here reminds us of that.

God will cut off those false prophets who utter falsehood and see lying visions.

And it is then – when they are cut off from the people of God –
that you will know that I am the Lord GOD.

In other words, it is when Ezekiel’s prophecy comes true,
that they will know (and acknowledge) that Yahweh is God.

Let me ask you a question:

Do you think that the false prophets *knew* that they were false prophets?

I don't.

I think most of them sincerely believed that they were true prophets.

They knew the scriptures, and thought that they were proclaiming the word of God.

Sure, I have no doubt that there were some who were frauds –

but I suspect that most of them were “well-meaning” but self-deceived.

There are two things about counterfeit prophets that you need to see:

1) “counterfeits characteristically proclaim messages that people want to hear, especially when the truth is painful” (Block, 409)

(Again, it is easy to point to others –

but I wonder whether I have been willing to tell the truth to you – even when it is painful!)

2) counterfeits usually are interested more in their own status than others –

they are not characterized by the way of the cross.

You do not see a cruciform life represented in them.

c. Whitewashed Walls Will not Stand in the Judgment...And You Shall Know that I Am the LORD! (13:10-16)

In verse 5 Ezekiel used the image of the wall –

and in the second statement of judgment (v10-16), he fleshes this out in more detail:

10 Precisely because they have misled my people, saying, ‘Peace,’ when there is no peace, and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash, 11 say to those who smear it with whitewash that it shall fall!

The image here is that the people have built an inferior wall.

It is poorly constructed,

but to cover the defects, the prophets come along and “plaster” it.

But the “plaster” they are using is no better than whitewash.

There is a word play going on here

between the words for “smear” and “vanity” –

so one could paraphrase this that they are smearing the walls with “hogwash.”

The walls of Jerusalem are flimsy –

and they are covered with the hogwash of the false prophets.

But hogwash cannot withstand the outpouring of God’s wrath (read):

There will be a deluge of rain, and you, O great hailstones, will fall, and a stormy wind break out. 12 And when the wall falls, will it not be said to you, ‘Where is the coating with which you smeared it?’

The prophets should have exposed the weakness and frailty of the wall –
but instead, they just covered it over with their hogwash,
and the result is the destruction of the wall –
and the death of the people and their prophets.

“With their self-inspired predictions of peace they have covered up the fundamental deficiencies in Israelite society and encouraged an illusory sense of well-being.” (Block 407)

And I wonder...

How often have I done that?

How often have I let you get away with thinking that you are okay?

You need to understand that all your self-centered dreams and plans are flimsy –
they will not stand!

Listen to how God says it:

Therefore thus says the Lord God:

I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath,

and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger,

and great hailstones in wrath to make a full end.

And I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash,

and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare.

When it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

There's that refrain again.

“And you shall know that I am the LORD.”

When I come in judgment – you shall know that I am the LORD.

You should have known I was the LORD before!

But because you refused to know me in my mercy,

you will know me in my wrath.

15 Thus will I spend my wrath upon the wall and upon those who have smeared it with whitewash, and I will say to you, The wall is no more, nor those who smeared it, 16 the prophets of Israel who prophesied concerning Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her, when there was no peace, declares the Lord God.

Jesus will speak like this in Matthew 23,

just before he prophesies the destruction of the temple:

27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matthew 23:27-28)

Paul also drew on Ezekiel's image in Acts 23,

when the high priest Ananias commanded that Paul be struck,
3 Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?”

Whitewash (for Ezekiel, Jesus, and Paul) is used to hide the truth.

But we need to be careful not to impugn the motives of those who hide the truth!

We often think of false prophets as the “ringleaders” –
but many false prophets are simply weak.

The pressure from their congregations can be immense.

The prophets in Babylon may have been “orthodox.”

They may have been honestly seeking to know the will of the LORD,
and studying the scriptures diligently in order to know what God had said.

And the false prophet’s message may well resonate with what *you* want to hear!

Today, preachers on both the left and the right are doing precisely this.

Take health care.

You can make a biblical argument

for several different political solutions to the current health care debate.

But if any preacher says “thus saith the LORD” regarding how to solve the debate

he is a false prophet –

he is self-inspired –

because the Word of God does not require *one* solution for how to run health care.

In the last few weeks I have focused on politics because that is where Ezekiel has focused.

He warns “Jerusalem in exile” not to trust in foreign powers.

Do not trust in Egypt.

Do not trust in Babylon.

Do not trust in the politics of this age.

And some have asked “does this mean that we shouldn’t be involved in politics?”

No – instead it means that your engagement in politics should take a cruciform shape –
you should reflect the way of the cross in how you engage in politics:

you may *not* misrepresent others;

you may *not* put the worst possible spin on their actions and motives;

you *must* love your political opponents

and be gracious and charitable toward them.

If your engagement with politics does not take a cruciform shape –

if you do not demonstrate humility and charity

in your political actions and attitudes

then you are building a flimsy wall –

and I, for one, will not coat it with hogwash!

I challenge you:

in the coming weeks, will you simply repeat the slogans of Babylon?

Or will you, in humility, demonstrate true love for your political “enemies”?

Let me put it this way:

Some of you have seen through Ezekiel's message that you have made your work an idol.

Does that mean you should give up working?

Some of you have seen through Ezekiel's message that you have made marriage your idol

Does that mean that you should divorce your spouse?!

Of course not!

Just because "good things" have become idols does not mean that we get rid of the good thing!

Rather, we must see that we have believed lies.

We have believed a twisted message – we have listened to the self-inspired prophets:

and therefore we need to repent.

And whether you have idolized politics, marriage, work, or anything else,

it means that you need to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus!

As we have been seeing Sunday evenings in Philippians,

the Christian life is a cruciform life – it is patterned after the cross –

as we are conformed to the sufferings of Christ,

so that we might also participate in the resurrection glory of our Savior.

I have started with myself,

but the temptation to be a false prophet hits all of us.

Let me point out how this works:

There is the temptation to be a jackal –

only interested in your own needs and interests.

There is the temptation to be a draft-dodger – to abandon the gap in the wall –

preferring your own safety and security –

and so you never get around to testifying to the gospel of Jesus.

And there is the temptation to be a white-washer –

you never confront anyone about their sin;

you never warn anyone about the coming judgment.

You don't want to offend anyone – and besides, they are such nice, moral people:

"Splish, Splash! On goes another coat of whitewash." (Duguid, 180)

We all face these same temptations.

And that is why we must remember our Lord Jesus Christ –

the prophet who has spoken to us the truth.

the true watchman, who stood in the gap and offered his own life

as the payment for our sins.

He did not cover our sins with a coat of whitewash,

but he covered them with his own precious blood,

and made our garments white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14).

Ezekiel then turns to the murderous witches:

2. Oracle against the Murderous Witches (13:17-23)

a. The Magic Bands and the Hunt for Souls (13:17-19)

17 “And you, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own minds.

Literally “out of their own hearts” –

These are also self-inspired prophets.

They are also driven by their own agenda – and not the agenda of Christ’s kingdom.

Prophesy against them 18 and say, Thus says the Lord God: Woe to the women who sew magic bands upon all wrists, and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature, in the hunt for souls! Will you hunt down souls belonging to my people and keep your own souls alive?

Unfortunately the details of what they were doing (v18) are not clear.

What we know is that they were sewing something, “magic bands” and “veils” – but what this refers to in terms of magical practice is not known.

But the effect is clear enough:

they are slaying the righteous and preserving the wicked:

19 You have profaned me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, putting to death souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live, by your lying to my people, who listen to lies.

In short, these are witches and charlatans who prey on the exilic community for their own profit.

b. I Am Against You: And You Shall Know that I Am the LORD! (13:20-21)

Verses 20-21 then introduce the coming judgment against the witches:

20 “Therefore thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against your magic bands with which you hunt the souls like birds, and I will tear them from your arms, and I will let the souls whom you hunt go free, the souls like birds. 21 Your veils also I will tear off and deliver my people out of your hand, and they shall be no more in your hand as prey, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

Yahweh will personally invade the witches’ realm,
destroy the tools of their magical trade,
and rescue his people from their grasp.

And *you* shall know that I am the LORD.

You – the witches – shall know.

You treated me as though I was no different than a Babylonian deity.

But you shall know that I am Yahweh!

Every knee will bow – every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD.

c. I Will Deliver My People Out of Your Hand: And You Shall Know that I Am the LORD! (13:22-23)

Verses 22-23 then bring a second announcement of judgment:

22 Because you have disheartened the righteous falsely, although I have not grieved him, and you have encouraged the wicked, that he should not turn from his evil way to save his life, 23 therefore you shall no more see false visions nor practice divination. I will deliver my people out of your hand. And you shall know that I am the Lord.”

A true prophet should encourage the righteous and dishearten the wicked.

A true prophet should call the wicked to repentance –

not confirm him in his evil ways!

There are two things that we should take from Ezekiel 13:17-23

1) beware of magic.

I don't think that you are tempted by tarot cards and crystal balls –

If you are, then get away!

There is no place in the Christian life for such things.

But there are more subtle forms of magic that are more likely to entice us.

Do you view God primarily as the key to health, happiness and success?

Do you view prayer primarily as a way of getting what you want from God?

In short, do you try to manipulate God?

Is your devotional life all about “you”?

Do not try to harness the power of God for your own selfish ends!

The solution to the magical way of thinking

is “passion for the honor of the Lord's name” (Block, 419)

that you love *him* (not because he gives you what you want –

but because of his great love for us in Christ Jesus!)

2) Women, what are you doing to encourage the righteous and dishearten the wicked?

Ezekiel speaks harshly to these witches – and rightly so!

But I would ask you, what are you doing to avoid their clutches?

Proverbs 1-9 tells us that there are only two paths –

the way of wisdom and the way of folly.

You will wind up on one or the other.

That's true for everyone – not just women –

but in this passage, Ezekiel addresses the women,

and so I will address you:

Paul said to Timothy that false teachers

“creep into households and capture weak women,

burdened with sins and led astray by various passions,

always learning and never able to arrive

at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:6-7).

What are you doing to make sure that you arrive at a knowledge of the truth –
not just “always learning” –
but actually arriving, actually knowing God –
and knowing who you are in Christ?

I know that many of you have great family worship, and family bible studies.
I know that many have solid private devotions and individual study.
But what are you doing to encourage others?

This church will either be characterized by women
who encourage each other to “know the LORD”
and grow in his grace,
or else it will be characterized by the witches of Ezekiel 13 –
and we will only know that he is the LORD
when he comes in judgment against us.

3. Oracle against the Elders of Israel: They have “Idols in Their Hearts” (14:1-11)

Okay.

We could stop there – with the guilt trip!
And you could go out this week and try harder.

Maybe it would last for a few weeks – a few months –
maybe not.

But Ezekiel 13 doesn't get to the heart of the problem –
and it certainly offers no solutions.
Ezekiel 14 reaches the heart.

14:1 Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me.

The last time we saw the elders was in chapter 8,
when Ezekiel saw the vision of idolatry in the temple.

Now Ezekiel sees the idolatry in their hearts.

The elders of Jerusalem in Jerusalem were committing outward idolatry (ch 8).

The elders of Jerusalem in Babylon appeared outwardly pure –
but in their hearts, they were just as bad

[read:]

2 And the word of the Lord came to me: 3 “Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them?”

All sin is rooted in idolatry –
loving something else more than we love the LORD our God.
Idolatry is the sin behind every other sin.

The elders have come to Ezekiel for a new word of hope from the LORD.
Instead, they get an old word of judgment.

You think like pagans – and yet you come to me? Says the LORD.

This recalls Elijah’s question on Mt Carmel in 1 Kings 18:

“How long will you go limping between two opinions?”

If Baal is god, serve him – but if Yahweh is God, serve him!

Or Joshua, at the end of his life, in Joshua 24,

Choose this day, whom you will serve –

the gods of Egypt, the gods of Canaan,

or Yahweh.

But as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.

I know how powerful – and how deceptive – the gods of the nations are.

They tell you that you can have it all!

that you can be a faithful Christian,

and be just like everyone else around you.

But you *cannot* serve two masters.

You cannot live like a pagan for six days

and then be a Christian on Sunday.

You cannot be double-minded.

But that is what the elders of Israel are trying to do.

And this is what the LORD says in v4:

4 Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Any one of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him as he comes with the multitude of his idols, 5 that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, who are all estranged from me through their idols.

You might think that God would say “I will not answer him!”

But no,

God will answer –

but his answer will be designed to rip through the idols of your heart.

This is terrifying!

Because you are an idolater!

There are things that matter more to you than God!

There are things that you love more than God!

There are people who are more dear to you than God!

And when you come to inquire of the LORD,

the LORD will answer you by laying hold of your heart

and ripping it away from your idols!

That *is* terrifying.

That hurts!!

When you have found your identity and purpose in your husband –

it hurts for God to say – NO, I will not let you do this anymore!

When you have found your identity and purpose in your work –
it hurts for God to tear your idols out of your heart!
And you start to realize how much you loved your idols...

You may be estranged from the Lord.
You know how this works in marriage.
Two people may be still living under the same roof –
but because of sin, you are practically estranged from your spouse.
God says he will not allow idolatry to keep his people away from him.

6 “Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations.

You have come today to inquire of the Lord.
And the Lord is answering you *right now*.
Hear the voice of the LORD!
Because if you do *not* repent – [read verse 8]:

7 For any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who separates himself from me, taking his idols into his heart and putting the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to a prophet to consult me through him, I the Lord will answer him myself. 8 And I will set my face against that man;

we have heard repeatedly that the problem with the elders of Israel
is that they have set their idols before their faces,
now we hear that the LORD will set *his face* against them.

I will make him a sign and a byword and cut him off from the midst of my people, and you shall know that I am the Lord. 9 And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel.

This is striking – God says that *he* has deceived the prophet.
Does God really deceive people?
If you look through all the cases of divine deception in the Bible
(e.g., Jeremiah 20, 1 Kings 22, Ezekiel 14, etc.)
there is a common theme:
the people who are deceived *want* to be deceived.
They don't want to hear the truth.
They are set upon going *their way*,
and they only inquire of the LORD in an attempt to confirm themselves
in their rebellion.
I knew a woman who wanted to do something contrary to God's word,
and she sought a sign from God – so that he would show his approval for it.
God gave her that sign, and so she did what she wanted,
and she paid dearly for her desire to be deceived.

God may let you manipulate him!

He may give you what you ask for – until it destroys you!

As Paul will say in 2 Timothy 4:3,

“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching,
but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves
teachers to suit their own passions,
and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”

If you want to be deceived,

God will send you false prophets who will be happy to deceive you!

10 And they shall bear their punishment—the punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike—

And if you will not repent of your idolatry, then you will be destroyed.

If I speak a false word and encourage you to remain in your idolatry, then I will be destroyed!

Why? (v11)

11 that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord God.”

The goal of all this is to purify the people of God –

to remove all those who are idolaters,

and restore the fellowship between God and his people.

And this is what Jesus has done!

Our Lord Jesus Christ has paid for all our sins with his precious blood,

and has set us free from all the power of the devil.

He bore our punishment on the cross.

He took the curse that we deserved.

And therefore all those who believe in him are sons of God –

heirs with Christ in the glorious inheritance that God has given his Son.

Indeed, the purpose of God in destroying idolatry from the midst of his people,

is so that we might render pure worship,

that we might love him with our whole heart –

that God might dwell with his people –

that they may be my people, and I may be their God.

And only the cross could accomplish that!